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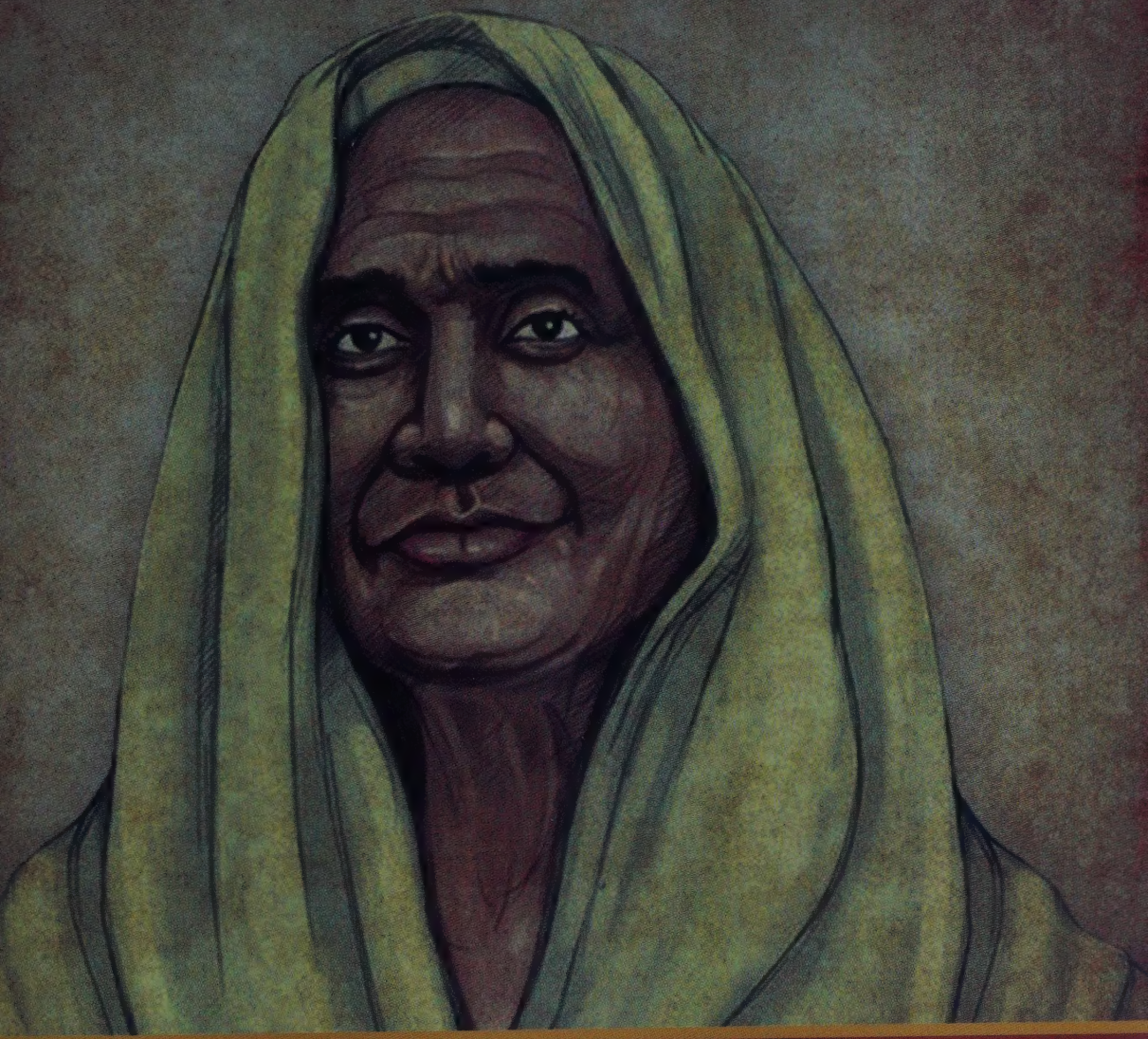

GANDHI BURI'S Shadow

PRAPTI SHARMA

Matangini Hazra, popularly known as Gandhi Buri, is one of the inspiring figures of the freedom movement of India. Daughter of a poor peasant, Matangini Hazra was married at the age of 12, and six years later, she was widowed. She was an ardent follower of Mahatma Gandhi. She worked for social welfare and actively participated in the freedom movement. During the Quit India movement, Gandhi Buri, who was 73, led a procession of 6000 freedom fighters. The British police tried to stop her and shot bullets at her repeatedly. But the strong-willed Gandhi Buri, continued to march, held the national flag high, and attained martyrdom in front of the Tamluk police station.

Gandhi Buri's unparalleled sacrifice and her courage to defy societal norms became the inspiration for this historical fiction. This novel follows the life of Binodini, a child bride, stuck in an abused marriage, fighting for her own personal freedom. A representation of all the women whose lives Matangini Hazra managed to inspire, Binodini struggles to fight society as India tries to break free from the shackles of colonialism and slavery.

GANDHI BURI'S *Shadow*

PRAPTI SHARMA

NATIONAL BOOK TRUST, INDIA

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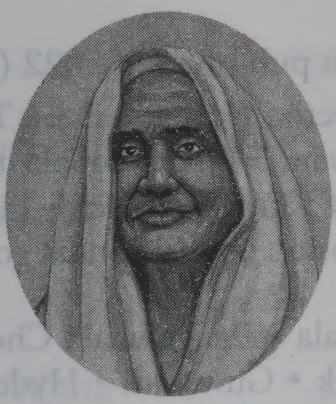

PRAPTI SHARMA

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PREFACE

Matangini Hazra was everything a warrior could be. A strong-willed Indian revolutionist who did not let her gender or widowhood, come in her way of her resolve to fight for India's independence. She was only twelve when her father, a poor peasant married her off to Trilochan Hazra of Alinan. He was around sixty-years-old at that time, five times her age. And so, when he died six years later, Matangini Hazra found herself widowed and childless at the age of eighteen.

This author cannot even fathom how she must have summoned her courage and decided to devote herself to social causes in the 1880s, the times when a woman was considered merely a piece of property that belonged to either her father, her husband, or her son. Matangini Hazra had none of these men in her life, and yet, history can now find her name proudly linked to many notable movements like Civil Disobedience and Salt Revolution. She was jailed, and yet she decided to fight back by becoming an active member of the Indian National Congress.

A true Gandhian, Matangini Hazra was affectionately addressed as 'Gandhi Buri,' Old Lady Gandhi in Bangla, and she lived up to the name successfully.

It was in 1942, when, as a part of the Quit India Movement, Hazra, who was 73 years at the time, led a procession of six thousand supporters, mostly women volunteers, for the purpose of taking over the Tamluk police station in Bengal. She had stridden forward fearlessly, appealing to the policemen to not shoot, chanting "Vande Mataram" all the while when she was shot once. Then two more shots followed as she had decided not to stop. She kept marching on. The guns could not stop her, even when the bullets had found their mark...

Both her hands were bleeding, and yet, she kept her hold on the Tiranga, the tricolour, intact.

Even as the blood trickled down her forehead, she kept on marching ahead, clutching the flag high, chanting, "Vande Mataram!" As she fell, she became immortal in the history of unsung warriors who did not shy away from sacrificing their lives for their motherland.

This historical fiction follows the life of Binodini, a fictitious character, and is a representation of all the women whose lives Matangini Hazra had managed to inspire—knowingly or unknowingly—throughout her life and even after she had bravely embraced martyrdom.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am honoured to have been given the opportunity to pen down this book on one of the most formidable women in the Indian history. Matangini Hazra, apart from being the subject of this historical fiction, was also the greatest source of inspiration for not just my character Binodini, but also for me. Her undying spirit, that continues to live on even after India completing 75 years of her independence, motivated me to write this book with honesty and determination.

Further, I owe my heartfelt gratitude to Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi for bestowing YUVA authors like me with a chance to contribute towards the literature of our country.

I am also thankful to National Book Trust, India for publishing this book. Shri Yuvraj Malik, Director, NBT and Shri Kumar Vikram, Project Head, NBT were a constant source of guidance throughout the Mentorship period.

Further, my mentor, Dr Manjeet Baruah, Assistant Professor, Special Centre for the Study of North East India, Jawaharlal Nehru University, guided me on every step of the way. His invaluable insights helped me to give a rich colour to my writing.

I would be amiss if I did not thank my family—both my parents, Dr. Anil Kumar Sharma and Ms. Poonam Kaushik; my brother Hemang, and my grandparents. My Nanaji, Shri S.K. Kaushik, who has always been more excited than me for this book to come out, was the constant push I needed to complete the novel on time.

I am also grateful to all my friends who believed in the potential of my pen. Bhavya Sharma, Anjali Gandhi and Paras Negi—who have always been willing to read my work and provide honest feedback—have been my greatest cheerleaders.

Lastly, I owe this work to India— she who is a mother to all those who revere her so. She has endured and broken the shackles of slavery and has bore the brunt of the sacrifice of thousands of freedom fighters who shed their blood for her. May she continue to breathe in the air of freedom and dignity forevermore.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Historical Figures

- MATANGINI HAZRA (GANDHI BURI), an Indian Revolutionary and Gandhian from Tamluk, Midnapore, Bengal. As a member of the Indian National Congress, she led the Northern procession to take over Tamluk Police Station as part of the Quit India Movement (The August Revolution) in 1942.
- AJOY MUKHERJEE, a Congress member from Tamluk, was one of the leaders of the August Revolution. He helped establish a parallel Tamralipta Jatiya Sarkar (Tamralipta National Government) in Tamluk in 1942 and in 1967, he became the fourth Chief Minister of West Bengal.
- SUSHIL KUMAR DHARA, another revolutionary from Tamluk, who helped establish the Tamralipta Jatiya Sarkar. He commanded the Vidyut Bahini, the army of the Jatiya Sarkar.
- SATISH CHANDRA SAMANTA, a Congress member from Tamluk. He was the first Sarbadhinayak (Director) of the Tamralipta Jatiya Sarkar.
- BARADA KANTA KUITI, fourth Sarbadhinayak (Director) of the Tamralipta Jatiya Sarkar.

- GUNADHAR BHAUMIK, a local school teacher and revolutionary who inspired Matangini Hazra to join the freedom struggle.
- SJ. ANIL KUMAR BHATTACHARJEE, commander of the faction of British soldiers deployed to stop the procession led by Matangini Hazra to Tamluk Police Station.
- LAKSHMI NARAYAN DAS, PURIMADHAB PRAMANICK, NAGENDRA NATH SAMANTA AND JIBAN CHANDRA BERA, members of the northern procession led by Matangini Hazra as part of the August Revolution; attained martyrdom alongside Hazra.
- SIR JOHN ANDERSON (LAT SAHIB), Governor of Bengal (1932-1937).
- TRILOCHAN HAZRA, Matangni Hazra's late husband.
- THAKURDAS MAITY, a poor peasant from Hogla village of Tamluk, late father of Matangini Hazra.

Fictional Characters

- BINODINI, a child bride from Saira village of Tamluk, who is a fictional representation of all the women who were inspired by Matangini Hazra to fight for their nation's as well as their individual independence.
- SHONKAR, a police constable in the British Police; Binodini's husband.
- ASHWINI, Binodini's mother.
- BONDITA, Binodini's childhood friend.
- SUCHITRA, Shonkar's younger sister, Binodini's sister-in-law.

- BHASKOR, a travelling trader, Suchitra's husband and Bipin's elder brother.
- BIPIN, Bhaskor's younger brother and Suchitra's brother-in-law; and Binodini's friend.
- ABHIJOY, a young revolutionary from Alinan, Tamluk; Sulata's husband.
- SULATA, a young revolutionary from Alinan, Tamluk, Abhijoy's wife and Binodini's friend.
- KAMLA, Shonkar and Binodini's neighbour and Binodini's friend.
- SUKHI, a poor fisherman belonging to the Harijan community from Shonkar's village.
- MITHUN AND CHONDRA DEB, Shonkar's colleagues.
- JONATHAN AND THOMAS, British soldiers deployed near Tamluk Police station to stop the northern procession along with Shonkar.
- PUNDIT TARAPADA, the village temple priest, Shonkar and Binodini's neighbour.
- ASHALATA, Shonkar's late first wife.
- KABIR, Bhaskor's friend in Calcutta.
- HASEENA, Kabir's wife.

PROLOGUE

1947, India

Binodini ran, as if for her life. Shonkar told her that it was the last cart of the day to leave for East Bengal, or what is now strangely known as East Pakistan, and she will have to hurry if she wants to catch it. So, she ran towards the cart, partially visible amidst the stampede, and Shonkar's wrinkled hand outstretched towards her, urging her to get hold of it. She ran so desperately that she forgot to take care of the ground she was running on, and tripped over an injured, fallen man in her way.

She hit the ground hard, her head saved from injury by her reflexive palms reaching out to the stony path before the rest of her body, and she exhaled, making a small tornado out of the dust below her.

She took a breath or two before pulling herself up. The cart was leaving and, Shonkar was shouting. Well, at least that was something familiar in the newly dishevelled state of her nation. She inadvertently giggled at her own dry humour, despite her vulnerable state. People were crushing her and stepping over her, as if she was a doormat. But, she was not a doormat! She

knew she wasn't a rag. No matter how many times she had been made to feel like one in previous ten years.

She hauled herself up. Ignited by the simmering anger, she suddenly felt a surge of courage in every bone of her body, and looked around. The Hindus were arriving in the carts, and the Muslims were leaving. She wanted to stay. But Shonkar, as usual, yelled at her, "Do you understand? My family is on the other side! I do not care if only Muslims are leaving. We are leaving too!"

Binodini sighed. All he cared about was himself. Though he claimed that he cared about his family, she knew better. She knew that they were not leaving to reunite with his family. They were just running away. Fleeing like cowards to escape the boycott that Shonkar feared for staying loyal to the British government. But what about her and her family? Well, they were doormats, easily packable into small boxes to be taken away to strange places on a whim, weren't they?

She took a deep breath and glanced at the cart again. With each passing moment, the cart was getting smaller and smaller.

She contemplated letting it go, but then she caught Shonkar's reddened and raging eyes, and she ran....

CHAPTER 1

THE LADY IN WHITE

Ten years ago...

Binodini spied an old lady in white clothes from behind her window curtain. Tall and proud, the old lady looked radiant standing outside her home, which was soon to become an alienated structure of mere mud and bricks. Maa always said that a daughter is a *Porer Sompotti* for her parents, a wealth that is never theirs to call. They are merely her custodians. She is with them only for the purpose of safekeeping, until her real family comes along and rightfully claims her to be theirs.

"I do not understand, Maa!" Binodini would lament it.

"You do not have to, Bini. You are only eight." Maa would chide her.

And in a fleeting moment of courage and stupidity, Binodini would dare protest, "Then why are you marrying me off? If I am only eight."

Needless to say, she would then get the beating of her life. All the while, she would cry, "Maa! I am *Porer Sompotti*. You cannot beat me! Once I'm married, my husband will teach you a lesson," which made her mother beat her even harder.

But now, as she watched the Lady in White, she was quite sure that it was a harmless act, and she did not even speculate that it could prompt her mother to summon her. So she looked on and tried to strain her ears to listen.

The old lady was seemingly trying to convince Maa of something, while Maa was trying hard to be polite. Her scrunched up nose and tense forehead were the indications. Binodini recognised the expression of her mother's simmering frustration quite well. Whatever the old lady was trying to persuade her of, it clearly was making her uncomfortable.

Binodini strained harder, "But Gandhi Buri, I do not think I can."

Gandhi Buri? Old Lady Gandhi? Is that what the Lady in White called? Did that term of apparent endearment make her Gandhi Baba's wife? No, Gandhi Baba's wife would not wear white clothes now, would she? Binodini looked down at her alta-smeared feet. She was lost in her thoughts, so much so that she did not even register that Gandhi Buri was no longer present outside her house, and Maa has made her way back into the house. By the time she did, Maa had already creeped up behind her. Binodini felt a sudden jolt, and she fell down.

"Binodini! What do you think you are doing?" She quickly got up. Unmindful of her dishevelled saree, she looked up at her angry mother. What has she done now?

"I...I do not understand, Maa!" she stuttered.

"That is the problem! You do not understand what is right, and you certainly do not understand what is wrong!"

Binodini wracked her brain as her mother paused to catch her breath for a moment. But as much as she tried, she could not think what possibly she could have done wrong.

"Why, Bini, why?" her mother was suddenly on her knees. She held her little shoulders tightly and shook her furiously, "You are soon to be a bride, Bini! Why in the name of Devi Maa did you lay your eyes on a widow?"

Binodini's jaw dropped, and her teeth clattered against each other as her mother kept shaking her violently.

"Stop the clattering! O Devi Maa, help me! This useless girl does not know how to behave!"

If she had not been seeing the world around her in circles, she would certainly have laughed out aloud at her mother's dramatic lament.

As the world slowly came to a stop, she looked up again and opened her mouth, but clearly, her mother had no intention of letting her say a word.

"That Hazra woman! What does she think she is doing? Visiting the houses of *Saubhagyawati*, married and blessed women, and inciting them to do the unthinkable! She has taken her name to heart! Being called Gandhi Buri does not make her Gandhi!"

Her mother had launched into a tirade now, moving about the house and throwing things from one place to another. As Binodini watched her Maa, she suddenly realised that she was throwing her clothes from the wardrobe to the *diwan*. She looked at her mother in bewilderment as she dragged her to the bathroom and ordered her to take a bath.

"Again!" Binodini exclaimed.

A mistake! A terrible mistake! she thought as her mother's bloodshot eyes bore deep into her and pierced her soul.

"Yes, Again! I do not wish any ill omen to befall you, Bini! You are going to be a bride soon. Do you understand?"

"As if you haven't been reiterating it to me for over a month, Maa!" Binodini's tongue betrayed her yet again, but thankfully, Maa had already stormed out to the kitchen, probably to lash out at the poor cooks now.

Binodini squinted at the water bucket and made a disgusted face, as if she had been told to bathe in egg yolks and dared to dip a finger in the water. "Coooooold!" she could not help but shriek out.

"You are not getting another bucket of warm water after what you have done!" Her mother's voice floated inside in furious bursts, and her shoulders drooped.

"But then I'll be up in a fever on the wedding day, Maa," she drawled, as a last resort. But when she was met with silence, save for the angry clanking of the utensils in the kitchen, she gave up.

But as she dipped her finger in the bucket again, she shook her head. No! She was not bathing with that monster of a liquid! What was the point anyway? She always managed to end up with mud and dirt all over her saree way before dusk. Even though Maa had forbidden her to go out and play, now that she was going to be a bride, Binodini nevertheless found it easier to get dirty, rather than remain clean.

But today would be different. She needed to go outside. And she would. The way her Maa had been

freaking out about her leaving the home, marriage seemed dreadful to her. Binodini felt that the days of her freedom were coming to an end, and she deserved one last rolling down in the mud before her wings were clipped forever. So, she sneaked out.

Binodini ran out, taking an impulsive left turn to her friend, Bondita's house. She did not want to halt in her way, but she could sense an unusual tension in the air. The central market square was more alive with villagers than ever before and people were busy gossiping around.

Binodini's curiosity stopped her to listen to what the hawkers, vendors and customers, were talking about with each other in conspiratorial tones.

"Would you join her again?" A lady in a red saree was being asked. Binodini never happened to get her name, mostly because her Maa never referred to her as anything other than 'the crazy lady across the street' in her usual rants about the irritants of the world?

"Is there even a doubt about it?" the lady replied. "Working with Hazra ji has become my sole reason for living, if I dare say!"

Hazra again? The Lady in White? Why was everybody talking about her? She seemed to be everywhere, even in the air surrounding Binodini. Her curiosity had been arisen. All she wanted to do was to know everything about the old lady. Bondita, her dear friend, had been forgotten, as well as her mother's warnings about never laying her eyes upon a widow. She did not understand. What would happen if she did? She had done it once,

and she could not see the sky crashing down, or the earth tearing apart to swallow her.

Binodini stared at nothing in particular for a long time. Anyone observing her closely would probably find her lost in her own thoughts. Suddenly, she was startled as she felt a hand over her shoulder and jumped.

"Are you lost, my dear child?"

Gathering her bearings, she turned around. Putting her hands on her hips, jutting her chin out and closing her eyes haughtily for effect, she shot, "How can I possibly be lost in my own village?"

"Well, I am sure you cannot be, considering that you can navigate your way even with your eyes closed."

Binodini heard a laughter and opened her eyes to find a swarm of women around the lady who had mocked her, the Lady in White! She gasped.

2
CHAPTER

SHUBHO DRISHTI: THE FIRST AUSPIOUS GLANCE

Binodini stopped thinking and that was something new because she never stopped thinking, even though Maa always told her that girls were not supposed to think. Binodini did not understand what she meant by that. She has a mind of her own! How is she supposed not to think? But she could not say anything as she stood before the old lady. Just a few moments ago, she had been devising plans to know more about her, but now that she was actually here, her tongue betrayed her.

When she could not come up with a question, she said the dumbest thing she could ever manage in her life, "You are tall!" and the Lady in White chuckled.

"Well, not quite. I look tall to you because you are short."

Binodini's brain suddenly started to work again and she felt offended. Putting her hands back at her hips, she exclaimed, "No, I am not!"

"Well, you are certainly not tall enough to be wearing a saree."

Binodini crossed her arms, assuming that it would make her look haughty and proud. She retorted, "I am to be a bride soon; I ought to be wearing a saree."

Binodini anticipated another chuckle from the lady, but instead, she saw her smile vanish altogether. She did not know the reason for this sudden change in her mood, but it certainly made her remember her mother's warning earlier that day. She panicked and covered her eyes with her palms, "Oh no! I am not supposed to be looking at you!"

It occurred to Binodini that it was now perhaps the lady's turn to get offended, but all she heard was a barely audible whisper, "You are too young to marry."

Binodini spread her fingers apart slightly to steal a peek at the lady's ashen face. It was now at eye level with hers, since its owner was now leaning in front of her.

"What is your name?"

"Bini." Binodini's voice sounded muffled, even to her own ears.

"Who are your parents?"

"Maa and Baba!" A soft chuckle followed.

"Lead the way to your house, Bini!"

And she did. For something about the lady's demeanour told her that there might be a chance to stop the wedding!

Binodini saw the bride standing in front of her and pointed an accusing finger at her, "Coward!" she shouted, and glared at the mirror.

Maa had told her that she looked beautiful, and yet, the only emotion she could feel while gazing at her own reflection was that of anger. She was now a caged bird, decked in the prison of her gold ornaments. They hindered her movement and restricted her from flying. She had put up a desperate attempt to break free from them earlier that morning, but one look from Maa, and she had been put back in her place.

Her eyes brimmed with tears, and if she let them out, they would wash away the kohl, and Maa would not think twice about the guests outside her room, and give her a beating on her wedding day! She was supposed to save them for *Bidaai*, the farewell ceremony, so she drank them.

The door suddenly crashed open, startling her. She turned and saw Bondita running towards her.

"Everybody is talking about something outside!" Bondita struggled to spit it out, breathing heavily.

"Yes, I can hear the noise," Binodini could not help but snap.

"Oh no, Bini! You do not know what they are talking about? I heard them."

"What is it?" Binodini was suddenly excited, "Has the wedding been called off?"

"No! On the contrary, they are preponing it by a couple of hours... you look pale, Bini. The blood has literally drained out of your face," and she gave out a nervous laugh before a deep frown appeared on her broad forehead.

Binodini could manage to utter only one word, "Why?"

"They suspect that Gandhi Buri's women might arrive here at any time to stop the ceremony...."

Binodini's heart raced as she felt her breathing getting shallower, "Will they send my Baba to jail?" she asked.

"What are you talking about?" Bondita looked puzzled, but Binodini hated to explain, so she snapped.

"That is what they were discussing amongst themselves the other day! When Gandhi Buri told me to lead them to our house, I heard them saying...that... Baba could be sent to jail for marrying me off because I am too young. So I slipped away halfway through here, when they were not looking."

She hung her head down. Her throat was choked. However, she did not cry, "I do not want to get married, but I also do not wish my Baba to go to jail."

When she saw Bondita looking at her pityingly, she felt embarrassed, until her friend spoke to her again, "Is that why you have been locked in your room ever since? I heard that your mother gave you a beating that day."

"Gandhi Buri somehow found our house," Binodini nodded, "I heard Maa assuring her that the wedding would be called off...But...."

"It looks like she lied," Bondita completed her sentence.

A heavy silence replaced their conversation, suffocating Binodini. They sat like that for what seemed like a long time. Their silence was broken when a cousin of hers came running inside and told them that the groom's party had arrived.

"Do not be sad, Bini," Bondita put her arms around Binodini, "marriage might not be such a bad thing after all. Our mothers are married, and they get to shout at us all day!"

Binodini giggled at her friend's terrible attempt to cheer her up, "That sounds horrible, Bondi!" and the girls laughed.

Binodini looked up at her friend, weirdly. For the first time ever, she realised that Bondita was taller than her. Maybe only a couple of inches, but the difference was quite apparent. Was she actually short for her age, as Gandhi Buri had mentioned? As soon as the Lady in White's name popped up in her head, sadness overwhelmed her entire being, and she hung her head again. She was disappointed as she thought that she had failed Gandhi Buri.

"Do you want to sneak a peek at the groom through the window? He might be handsome, like a prince!"

Binodini knew that Bondita had sensed the change of mood in her and was trying to cheer her up, but she was afraid that her efforts were going down the drain. She shook her head.

Just then, the door opened, and both of them jumped. It was Maa.

"Come on, Bini. It's time."

Maa thrust down the pair of betel leaves in her palms and instructed her, "Hold them in front of your eyes until the *Saat Paak*, the seven circles, alright? You are

not supposed to look at the groom's face before the *Shubho Drishti*. Do you understand, Bini?"

"As if I even want to!" Binodini's tongue slipped yet again. Thankfully, Maa could do nothing but give her a stern glare amidst the chuckling swarm of guests, "I do not want a tantrum right now, Bini!" she forced a whisper.

Binodini lifted her eyes and tried to look past her looming mother and the guests behind her. She caught sight of her father. His forehead was crowded with several worry lines. She wondered if he too was scared like her about going to jail.

"Bini, are you listening?" Maa called her out, but Binodini's eyes had caught someone else's now. A boy's! He looked about the same age as her. Standing beside Baba, he wore a cream-coloured *kurta* with a lighter *dhoti* beneath. By keeping his hands behind his back, he was trying to look proud and important. Was he the groom?

He did not look like a prince! He was not handsome at all! To Binodini, he looked like every other boy she had ever played and fought with. He looked stupid! She frowned and stuck out her tongue at him, and he puffed his chest in response. She glared at him, and he looked away, as if he was too old to be indulging in this silly game with her. Blood rushed to Binodini's ears. She had been offended.

"Bini!" her mother's furious whisper pulled her out of the moment, "What do you think you are doing? Hold the leaves in front of your eyes, and sit down on the *pidi,* the low wooden stool."

Binodini looked down at the stool and thumped down on it angrily. She had no choice, anyway.

When Maa made sure that she wasn't peeking around the leaves, she beckoned Binodini's cousin brothers, and they lifted her up along with the *pidi*. They took her to the centre of the courtyard, where the groom apparently stood, and moved her around him in circles seven times. The courtyard was suddenly alive. Women around her were hooting, producing *Ululudhvani*, the ululation, from their mouths, and quite unexpectedly, Binodini suddenly felt her spirits lifting.

No matter how reluctant she felt, *Ululudhvani* was soothing her in a strange way. Perhaps Bondita was right! Marriage might not be such a bad thing after all. The boy seemed to be manageable enough. A little pretentious and proud, of course, but Binodini knew that he did not stand a chance against her.

As the *Saat Paak* came to a conclusion, Maa told her to remove the betel leaves from her eyes for *Shubho Drishti*. She took a deep breath and prepared herself to give the boy an evil smile of her own. He had to know what lay ahead for him.

It was a perfect strategy. But shockingly, the boy was not someone she was looking at when she opened her eyes. Her smile vanished and her jaw dropped. The boy was not standing where the groom was supposed to be. He was not the groom. A forty-something man, about the same age as her father, was standing in front of her.

Tears finally found their way out of her eyes, she broke down, before her *Bidaai*.

3
CHAPTER

THE STUBBORN DOOR

Binodini was flying. Or so she felt. Except that instead of wings, she was being carried across the air by other people's hands. Those had surely been clipped off, packed into a pile of wood, and burnt on the funeral pyre of her freedom and dreams. Not that she could articulate her feelings in such poetic words, but she felt like that.

She could see the Hands—flying her along with the cursed *pidi* and tying her to a middle-aged man. The Hands—flying her across the courtyard of her childhood and delivering her to the palanquin. The Hands—flying her out of the palanquin and into a much smaller courtyard of dead people who acted like the living. The Hands—flying her to a stranger, who will now control each and every moment of her life, and force her to follow his instructions. Hands. Not wings. Just Hands.

The horse cart pulled into the large courtyard of her dead childhood, and she awkwardly stepped down to stare at it. Was this really the place she had left behind? Only three years back and now it looked like an abandoned cemetery. The people inside had no idea of her arrival. She preferred it that way, to go inside unannounced and find out if she had been missed at all.

She took a deep, long breath, trying to inhale the courage that had once been part of the air of this neighbourhood, which had helped her sneak out from her mother's clutches and run around to explore every crack and corner of this now forlorn looking village. It was mid-afternoon and people were probably cooped inside to escape the heat. She stepped ahead and ran her hand over the outer boundary wall of her house—her mother's house. She tried to find the little crack that only she knew about—the one that was not really visible to the naked eye, but could only be noticed by the touch of gentle fingers. She stood there like that for long. But she was snapped out of her thoughts, when she called her out, twice.

"Bini...is that you?"

Binodini turned to answer the voice. Her mother had not changed much. It had only been three years for her.

"Nomashkaar Maa," her voice sounded flat, even to her own ears, devoid of any emotions. But a tiny part of her heart still hoped to see her mother coming forward and pulling her into a tight embrace, like the way she had embraced her during her *Bidaai*. Even though it had only been to forcefully whisper into

her ears, "Be good, Bini! Do not let us down in your husband's house."

Her mother did not come forward to embrace her, or ask her whether she had been good at her husband's house. She only smiled. Or so Binodini imagined. Perhaps only a tiny one that she imagined it to be there, lurking at the corner of her mother's lips. A crooked, half-hearted smile.

"Come in, won't you?"

Binodini sniffed at the air again, as she entered her mother's house. She was filled with nostalgia as she was reminded of that particular smell of the house; old Bangla newspapers; fish pickles, duly prepared and stored in a dry corner of the kitchen; and sarees that Maa had always forced her to wear.

"You did not write."

"Huh?" she turned to respond to her mother, who was glancing at her with a strange, faraway look clouding her face.

"You did not write to announce your imminent arrival...Bini...."

"If I had, then you would have made sure to keep me locked out?" Binodini could not help but ask, accusation ringing clear and loud in her words, and her mother blanched.

"I...I do not know why you say that. You have not lost your notorious streak, have you? Ahe...ha...."

Binodini could not decipher if her mother had attempted a cough, or a nervous laugh. Perhaps a cough first, changed to a nervous laugh mid-way.

"I will see if I can get you something. Perhaps lemonade? That would be perfect, wouldn't it? The

heat is unbearable, eh?" She rushed and made an escape towards the kitchen, leaving Binodini behind with her tired eyes fixed on her. At last, she averted them and trailed them onto the old wooden cabinet kept in the drawing room instead.

Despite the fatigue, she did not wish to sit down. Not, at least, before she had been asked to. She did not feel welcome here...in a house that she once dared to call her own. Her treacherous memory took her back to that particular day when she felt abandoned by this brick structure...about three years ago... after her wedding... yes... that's how long she had been able to survive at her husband's house.

A child then, she had been asked to grow up in a day and do the chores that her mother had been doing for as long as she could remember. She was ordered to wake up before everyone else! Take a bath! Cook! Prepare tea! Serve! And then do the dishes and laundry!

Why she has to wash everyone's clothes? Wasn't that supposed to be the washerman's or washerwoman's job? Why weren't there any cooks in the house? And why she has to do the cleaning of the house?

The first time, when her sister-in-law asked her to do the chores, her tongue did what it could do the best. It betrayed her. She blurted out quite loudly, "Why, Nonod ji, are you people poor?"

If her own instincts hadn't told her that she had crossed the limit, the otherwise indifferent but suddenly aghast face of her husband, quickly flushed to an embarrassed red certainly had. She quickly got to the chores, which she had no idea how to do, and quite predictably, made a spectacular mess of it all.

It was rather epic—the scene. Would the Lady in White be proud of her? It was highly likely. The dishes were rather in a large heap of soap water, and the clothes were in a bucket full of... well... just water. It must have been a couple of hours, and all she had been able to accomplish was the mess. Now they would surely see sense and realise that she was pretty useless. They would do the chores themselves then, or better yet, would send her back home with a pretty note tied around her neck.

It was a mistake! This Queen does not belong to a humble abode such as ours. Do take good care of her!

Then she could proudly go to Gandhi Buri and tell her how she had ended her marriage within a month.

But as it turned out, nothing of that sort happened. Her husband's sister did not find the situation epic, "Ore Deva! Oh Lord! What have you done, you imbecile piece of trouble? Have you never done the chores before?" The poison that dripped down with her words made Binodini squirm in her place.

She had had to bear her mother's scolding all her life, and her thrashing even more so, but it never made her so uncomfortable and scared. For it indicated not only an imminent thrashing, but something more dreadful... something that she could not clearly see right now. She was certain that her sister-in-law's voice had been traversing out of the washing area loud and clear all this time, and, no one dared to come and intervene. Not even her husband. Perhaps he believed these womanly squabbles were beneath him, or perhaps, he too was scared of his sister, although that was highly unlikely. No one came. No one, but him.

He was her sister-in-law's *debor*, her brother-in-law. She did not understand why her sister-in-law did not live with her husband, at his house. Perhaps she came here only for the wedding along with this boy, who arrived just in time to stop his sister-in-law from slapping her. He intervened, "Let it be no, Boudi. It does not look like that she was taught any of this." He said this with enough pride to infuriate Binodini.

Hands perched strategically over her hips, she tipped her nose in the air and said, "Why Bipin, have you been taught any of this?"

Her sister-in-law gasped. She was smacked and made to fly across the room, and her head smashed against the wall with a thud. There was no blood, but she had nevertheless been wounded.

She wrote a desperate letter to her mother, who lived at a few hours' distance, informing her about her return to home soon for good.

A relative who was returning to her village at the precise time agreed to carry the letter across. Then, in the dead of the night, she escaped. She did not remember much of her journey except the blurry darkness and the horse cart which offered her the ride to her home. Most of her journey was spent sleeping and the horse cart dropped her in front of her home at the crack of dawn.

Oh how she had beheld the blessed door of her house in the welcome light of dawn and how she had spent the entire morning knocking her life out of the latch. But the door had remained stubbornly closed and foreboding in its place. If she had not sensed the presence of her mother inside, she would have perhaps

assumed that she had gone out of the city with Baba. But it was there—the presence, cold, as well as unrelenting.

She sat there for hours, hoping her mother would recognise her. She knocked on the door crying, "Maa, it is me! Bini! Maa," but to no avail.

After hours of persuasion by the neighbours, she finally budged. Her ride back to her husband's house was arranged and she left with a feeling of abandonment looming heavily on her heart. Since then, she did not visit her mother's house.

4
CHAPTER

THE SPILT TEA

"Will you not sit, Bini?" Her mother's voice brought her back to the present, filling the hollow emptiness of her soul with a deep sadness and with that came a tiny amount of treacherous hope. She wished to see in her mother's eyes, what she had been devoid of seeing in people's eyes since eternity. She wished to see love, care, and a longing for her daughter in her mother's eyes. Her mother did everything but did not look into Binodini eyes. She presented the lemonade and roshogullas in front of her, and took an excruciatingly long time to serve them, all the while rambling about how she had prepared the sweet delicacy over days of hard work.

"Maa..." she started to say, but her mother kept on describing the recipe for the sweet.

"Maa!" she spoke louder this time, "I do not wish to hear the recipe for roshogullas!"

"But...you...you may use it to serve your...."

"Husband?"

"Yes," her mother's tone was hesitant, in contrast to Binodini's harsh tone.

"I do not wish to serve anyone!"

The mother looked at her daughter's fisted hands and her angry face for a long time; she did not dare to look into the eyes of the little girl she had bid farewell to three years ago. But all she could see was a cold and distant stranger sitting in front of her. She could not bear to remain in her presence any longer and stood up abruptly.

"I left something on the stove. I should go and check."

Binodini was left alone yet again. Her sadness had finally given way to anger. She was here after all these years to see her mother, and the only thing she could manage to speak about was the cursed roshogullas. She had had enough. She stood up to leave. She thought of informing her mother about her departure, as should have been proper, but her anger won over propriety. She stepped forward to storm off, only to be stopped by a sudden glimpse of Gandhi Baba's solemn face on the front page of Baba's daily Bangla newspaper, perched over the shelf. Without realising, her feet moved of their own volition and she felt herself levitating towards the newspaper. She picked up the newspaper curiously to find both Jinnah and Maulana Azad staring at her along with Gandhi Baba.

Jinnah had released some replies to Azad in the press...

"I refuse to discuss with you, by correspondence or otherwise, as you have completely forfeited the confidence of Muslim India..."

Binodini felt herself going still as she read, not realising that her mother had returned, and that the

sight of her daughter reading a newspaper had shocked her into a spiral of emotions and memories.

"Bini?" Ashwini called out to her daughter, who seemed to have gone very still after reading the newspaper. This was a rare sight for more reasons than one. Ashwini had never seen her daughter interested in reading... anything... let alone a newspaper. As far as Bini was concerned, she had the attention span of a goldfish. She knew her from the time when she struggled to remember alphabets, not because she was a dull child, but because her focus always drifted away from the learning part, and settled on unimportant and apparently hilarious things like her home tutor's toothbrush moustache. When Bini was a toddler, Ashwini found Bini's antics endearing. She had doted over her, pampered her, and eventually, spoiled her until she realised that she had gone too far beyond.

Binodini was only five when Ashwini's husband first raised the issue of finding a matrimonial alliance for their daughter, and to say that the thought of parting with Bini rattled her, would be an understatement. She tried to voice her disagreement, but one disapproving look from her husband had been enough to shut her up.

"You have three years at most," he said, and directed her to mend her ways. He always frowned at her for her inability to give him a son, and remained an absent and ignorant father to Bini. Thus, Ashwini rather wished that he remained absent than become abusive and raise his hand over her little girl. So she had taken it upon herself to try and instil discipline in her daughter. Her hand had shaken the first time when she hit Bini, sending the little girl into a shock

and silence broken by her hysterical sobs. But as she had made it a habit to hit her every time she broke a rule and behaved in an unladylike manner, Bini became even more adamant about doing the exact opposite of what she was told to.

True to his promise, Ashwini's husband found an alliance for their daughter after three years. She then dived into the preparations like a dutiful wife, all the while praying in her heart for a divine intervention that could stop her daughter's wedding to a 43-year-old childless widower who was older than her husband. However, when divine intervention arrived in the form of Hazra, she gave away all her reservations and suggested the preponement of the ceremony, hoping that her daughter would change for her own good. But now, as she stood before her daughter, she did not like the change that she was seeing at all.

She cleared her throat and called out to her daughter again, "Bini?"

Bini looked puzzled, "I haven't been able to browse the newspapers recently. What is Jinnah ji replying to? I need to read further..."

Ashwini froze in her place with the tray full of fish snacks and tea in her hands. She stared at her daughter while she read further. What in the name of Devi Maa had gotten into her?

"Bini?" She prodded.

"Hmm?" Her daughter was engrossed in the newspaper completely.

"What are you...."

"Apparently, Maulana ji, the Congress president, had written to Jinnah ji, asking if he would support them

with the idea of having a multiparty government for the duration of the Second World War. Oh Devi Maa... Jinnah ji has uttered some really hurtful words."

"Bini!" Ashwini was horrified. She did not know the girl standing in front of her anymore. She thumped the tray on the table, not particularly caring about the spilled tea, and snatched the paper from her daughter's hands. That got her attention.

"Maa, what?"

Ashwini lowered her eyes, not letting her gaze wander over her daughter's cheeks, and sat down, fuming over the tea and snacks instead. She swallowed her uneasiness and beckoned Bini.

"Are you horrified because I'm reading...."

"Why would I be horrified?" Ashwini replied a little too quickly. She cleared her throat, breathing deeply to calm her nerves down, "We taught you to read Bini. I know you know how to..."

"Politics! Are you terrified that I'm reading politics?" Bini had hit the arrow on point. But how could she admonish her? She is a *porer sompotti* now. So she chose digression instead of truth.

"Come, have your tea."

"Won't you answer me?"

Oh Devi Maa! Why would the girl not let go? Ashwini sighed away her growing unease, and addressed her, still not meeting her eyes, "Yes, you are making me uncomfortable with all that talk about politics, Bini. I do not like it. You are not supposed to be getting into such..."

"Everyone should be getting into such stuff, Maa. Everyone should know what is going on in our nation. We are at a crucial point of history."

"Says who?" Ashwini was now getting annoyed. This daughter of hers, who did not even know and care about tying her saree properly, was talking about the affairs of the nation.

"Says every one! Gandhi Baba, the Congress, even Gandhi Buri knows that something major is going to happen."

Ashwini's head snapped up at the mention of Matangini Hazra's name. A sudden chill reverberated her whole body and she shivered. The weather outside had suddenly taken a dark turn. It was going to rain, and yet, her shivers had nothing to do with it.

"Says who now?" For the first time since her arrival, Ashwini looked at Binodini. She hated to, but could not help. Binodini went mum, perhaps suddenly realising that she had misspoken, and averted her eyes... not in shame, but in sheer defiance.

Ashwini felt her blood boiling inside her very veins. Anger quickly took over her discomfort, "I cannot believe that you are still in touch with that lady! How could you, Bini? That woman tried to stop your wedding. She almost..."

"Almost! Only if she had...."

"Bini! The audacity! I cannot believe you...."

"And I cannot believe you, mother!"

Ashwini opened her mouth to speak, but thought it best not to speak. She pursed her lips and closed her eyes to calm down.

"Is that the only thing you know how to do best, mother? Close your eyes in the face of reality? Thinking that perhaps reality will close its eyes and not see you as well?"

Ashwini's hands flew to her temples on their own accord. She was developing a headache, but she had to get some sense in her daughter's head first, "Does your husband know?"

"Is there a particular reason that he should?"

"That would be enough!" Ashwini blew up! She could not have it anymore. Adventure had rubbed her daughter off wrongly, and before she knew it, both of them were on their feet, facing off.

"Your tongue, Bini! I should have cut it off and thrown it away in the Hooghly the moment you uttered your first word!"

"And who would have married your tongue-less, mute daughter then?"

"You know no bounds, Binodini! A tongue-less, mute bride is always better than a bride whose tongue does not know better than to speak in front of her husband!"

"At least my tongue knows when to speak up for its master! I know when to voice my concerns aloud when they matter. I know when to speak for things that matter...."

"You are a married woman. The only thing that should matter to you is to serve your husband and bore him a child.

"Why! To abandon my child when she needs me the most! Just the way you did, mother?"

That last blow knocked Ashwini's breath away. She felt as if she had been slapped right across the face. She remembered Bini's letter announcing her 'return' home only after a month of her wedding and how she had longed to smash the doors open and pull her Bini

into a tight embrace! And how she had to press her hand into the doors and merely feel her daughter's presence on the other side instead. Her husband had stood looming over her for hours, daring her to open the door, daring her to cry. So she could only shed ocean of tears from her swollen eyes for nights to come following that fateful day.

Unshed tears of pain came out of her eyes. She had been defeated. Deflated, she turned away from her daughter. She could not bear to look at her anymore. She did not have the courage to face her. Unfortunately, her daughter could read her mind.

"Now that rage has been burned away, you choose to steal your eyes away from me yet again. Why will you not look at me?"

Ashwini rounded about to her daughter, finally choosing to actually see her and acknowledge the truth. Once a flawless beauty like Rabindranath Tagore's art, half of it was now marred, as if someone had accidentally spilled a bottle of ink all over his painting. Her purple and swollen left cheekbone had only been stopped short of spreading its ink to her lotus eye.

She thought that even if she had not been considerate enough all those years ago to not hit her daughter in the face when she was still hers to be called, she still would not have been capable of causing such deep bruises. Bini had pissed her off several times, and she had made her thrash her even more, to the point that her blows sometimes even reached her face. But she had never been angry with her to such an extent to cause such deep scars which only left one possible explanation, "You must have deserved it."

Ashwini registered the pain in Bini's eyes before she heard the sigh of shock that escaped her mouth. Before she could stop her daughter, she was gone, unintentionally hitting the tray kept over the table's edge with her knee on her way out. The tea had been spilled.

CHAPTER 5

WAR OF THE RIVERS

Binodini dashed out of her mother's house, vaguely aware that she was leaving this time for good, never to return. The cart puller helped her climb on, as she frantically brushed away her stinging tears. But his careful demeanour rekindled the angry fire within her once more. The slanting raindrops crashing over her left half did little to douse it off, and as the weather turned darker, so did her mood.

"Where to?" The cart puller asked cautiously, taking over the reins of the bullock once more.

"Geonkhali," Binodini's voice was quiet, but she was certain that it had travelled easily to the front.

"Geonkhali? But the weather...."

"Just move!" She snapped, trying to keep the edge out of her voice in vain, and the cart puller obeyed. As the wind picked up speed and rainfall intensified, the cart struggled to navigate through the swampy roads. Twice, the wheels got stuck in mud and the cart puller had to jump down to pull them out. Finally, at about two kilometres from the *sangam*, the bull and its owner,

both gave up and Binodini decided to walk for the rest of the path.

As the clouds rumbled and the downpour enveloped her entirely in her murky state, she managed to cover the distance in half an hour. She stopped at the disturbed bank of Rupnarayan and watched it merge with Hooghly effortlessly.

Otherwise brimming with locals out for a beautiful picnic, the riverside was deserted today. As far as her eyes could see, she was all alone. She was almost always lonely, but rarely alone. Today, she was both.

Her mother's careless comment had cut her deep. 'You must have deserved it!' Her words rang in her head like a persistent temple bell. How was she supposed to keep standing upright now? How could she stand tall, with her head held high, confident that she would pull through? Her own mother had abandoned her today, truly. Last time, when she visited her house, she was greeted with a closed door. Then she tried to make herself believe that her mother perhaps wanted her to learn to accept her husband's house. That treacherous hope had lived on somewhere in a deep corner of her heart like a flickering candle. But today, that candle had been blown out, and she felt an engulfing darkness taking over her entire soul. She wanted to hit someone violently, just like she herself was hit regularly by her sister-in-law and sometimes, even by her ignorant husband. She wished to break boulders, cut the water into pieces, and strike her abusers back in their faces. 'Perhaps that is what darkness does to you,' she thought, 'external darkness frightens you, makes you fear the unknown, while internal darkness

drives you to violence, making you more animal and less human.'

Perhaps that was the reason that Gandhi Baba advocated *ahimsa*, non-violence, and Gandhi Buri followed him so religiously. "Only love can defeat hate Bini," she always said, and so, Binodini calmed down. She closed her eyes and let the rain wash away the hate.

She could not tell for how long she stood there in that state, but when she opened her eyes again, the rain had slowed down into a drizzle, and the dark rain clouds were cut through by little rays of sunshine. She looked over to take in the Triveni Sangam. Hooghly was almost peaceful now. An arm of the mighty Ganges, it exuded divinity. Rupnarayan, on the other hand, was surrounded by a mother-like nurturing aura, completing its journey by giving her all to the Hooghly.

In hindsight, the view as well as the confluence was beautiful, almost serene. But Binodini knew like any other Bengali that the peaceful confluence was tinctured by violence and deep sorrow. The Damodar flooded Midnapore almost every monsoon. It represented the turmoil she had been experiencing deep within only a few moments ago and her sadness permeated her soul as deep as the river itself. She wondered if a day would ever come when she would relate to the Rupnarayan more than the Damodar. She wondered if she would ever feel more nurturing, less destructive, more happy and less sorrowful. But she knew that she was virtually incapable of feeling completely happy or nurturing, for that matter. She would always remain a confluence of emotions, but was hopeful that one day the scales would tip towards the positive ones. One day, Damodar would

be overpowered by Hooghly and Rupnarayan, and she would be at peace with herself. But it would take a huge war on the rivers for that day to come.

She looked into the distance, staring at the other side of the bank, expecting to see nothing and no one, when she saw him. He was a cutting figure, standing out in his white *dhoti- kurta* and an upright build. Standing afar, Binodini could feel the same anxiety and sadness in that stranger as she felt within herself. She could not see his face clearly, but his soul emanated foreboding energy into his aura, and in that split second when she thought that they had made eye contact, she felt the foreboding transfer into herself too. Her racing heart was the imminent proof of the fear that had suddenly gripped her. She had a strange premonition. The man... was about to die.

Abhijoy's heart was racing. His wife's words echoed in his ears, *Don't go! I beg you, don't go.* But even though the thought of going against the British government was scary, he was convinced that this was something he had to do. Jinha wanted a partition, Mahatma Gandhi was pained at the idea of partition. The British wanted the Congress' support for World War. While the Congress wanted civil disobedience.

In such a confused state of affairs, Mahatma Gandhi called for an individual Satyagraha. Abhijoy did not completely understand what it meant, but Dhara Babu was participating in it, so it had to be something important. Abhijoy wasn't an educated man. In fact, he

could barely scribble down his own name, but Dhara Babu was a highly educated fellow. The way he talked so passionately about this Satyagraha, and about his vision of independence for the country, Abhijoy found himself compelled to follow his every word, even if it led him to his death.

Engrossed in his thoughts by the Triveni Sangam, his eyes suddenly caught the sight of a girl just across the opposite bank. The girl standing upright amidst the slanting drizzle in a red saree was watching him as he watched her. Somehow, in that split second when their eyes met, he felt a strange connection with this young woman. Although this connection did little to soothe his nerves, he realised that a strange confidence was taking birth in his heart. This feeling was rare, but for the first time in his life, he could say something with certainty. The girl...would go a long way ahead... unlike him.

Suddenly, the moment was broken. Abhijoy had to get going. He had a Satyagraha to participate in. He could almost see it now – his immediate future, however short it might be. He could see himself walking towards the Mahishadal *thana*, to peacefully protest against the war. He could see himself, with a racing heart and trembling feet, walking arm in arm with other youths and shouting slogans. He could see himself being pushed and pulled by heartless constables and thrown into jail with his comrades. He could see himself again, trying to hold on dear life as the police's brutal, unrelenting *lathis* struck his fragile bones, but falling unconscious instead. He could see himself breathing his last and his soul, slipping out of his tortured body

with nothing but the spirit of Satyagraha alive in his soul and only the words of a revolutionary ringing out of his mouth....

Not a pie, not a man for the war effort...

"Abandonment is a tricky thing, my dear," Gandhi Buri said, "You might feel someone has abandoned you, whilst the one abandoning you might have a different opinion than yours."

Binodini's ears perked up. Although she knew that it wasn't her abandonment that she was talking about, she nevertheless wished to understand what Gandhi Buri meant. Sulata, a village woman, probably read her mind. Sitting in front of Gandhi Buri in the latter's humble cottage, Sulata looked like the mirror image of her host, only much younger, and yet with a much more slouched-down frame in contrast to Gandhi Buri's upright, brave shoulders. When she spoke, her voice was so feeble that Binodini could hardly hear her, "How Gandhi Buri? My *Pati Babu* did abandon me." Ah yes, Binodini realised belatedly, almost face palming herself mentally, that Sulata only seemed like the mirror image of Gandhi Buri because she was in white just like her. In fact, the only thing that connected the two women was their clothes, a symbol of their widowhood. Other than that, they were nothing alike.

"Your husband did not intend to abandon you, dear. Intention is everything."

"I had asked him not to go," Sulata sobbed inadvertently, "and yet..." she managed to whisper these

words, before breaking down into uncontrollable tears for the third time in the past 20 minutes.

While Binodini, for the umpteenth time now, struggled to keep her tongue in check and managed to not blurt out words that echoed in her mind relentlessly, 'How can one cry for one's husband? Should not one be happy for the freedom one attains after one's husband is gone?' But, seeing Sulata cry for hers, she thought that perhaps, not all husbands were alike. If Sulata's husband was indeed worth crying for, Binodini felt bad that she had to lose him.

Then Gandhi Buri's compassionate voice broke into her thoughts, "He chose to die like a hero rather than live like a coward. May your Abhijoy rest in peace."

6
CHAPTER

GO BACK, LAT SAHIB!

Matangini scanned the area flooded by Damodar and then turned inside to evaluate her heart. It was heavy through and through. Every year, more than the river's rage, it was the tears of the people of Purba Midnapore that flooded the district; and those who did not turn out to be lucky enough to remain afloat, were taken away by the river of tears, leaving behind their loved ones to drown in sorrow. Every year, she prayed to the River of Sorrows to have mercy on her people. However, every year it turned out to be more disappointing than the last. But this year, it was even more so. They were in October 1940, and they had been actively participating in Satyagraha along with the rest of the nation, but this annual disaster had somewhat put a pause in their momentum. All their energy was now directed towards restoring their everyday lives, and little could be done to oust the British at such a difficult time. After all, you first need to fight your inner demons before dealing with the outer ones.

"Gandhi Buri, there is no space left in your hut," Matangini's reverie was broken by this sweet girl's distressed voice. She looked down at her and, as usual, tried not to wince at her blackened cheek, "But the number of sick people keeps on multiplying."

Matangini sighed. She had to be strong for the rest of them, if not for herself, so she patted lovingly on the girl's head and instructed, "Go help others with the makeshift tents, Bini," and the girl was gone.

For the rest of the day, and night, and for the next several days, Matangini worked tirelessly to provide relief to the affected people. She let them into her house after getting it repaired, arranged doctors for the sick, and nursed the sick. Volunteers were arranged to distribute rice to the needy families and rebuild the collapsed houses. Even though the water was subsiding gradually by mid-October, the condition of the people did not look any better. Matangini was rather afraid that they would soon be witnessing an outbreak of epidemics.

The Ramakrishna Mission was helping with the relief work as well as distributing food and other services in Tamluk, but their funds were depleting fast. The student association of Midnapore too was proactively collecting funds for the relief work, but seeing people suffering in front of her was becoming difficult by every passing moment. Perhaps her old, frail body had exhausted all its strength after all these years. She felt hope draining from her, as darkness took its place, but just as she thought to give in, she was jolted out of it quite suddenly by a pair of raging balls of energies.

"Gandhi Buri!"

"Gandhi Buri!"

The girls, one in a red saree, the other in a white saree were talking to each other, but stopped as she stood in front of her.

"What is it, Bini, Sulata?"

"I think Bini is...."

"No, I think Sulata is wrong."

"I told her she should not have eaten those...."

"I still think she is wrong."

"This is not the flood sickness...."

"How could you say that?"

"It definitely is."

"Well, I still think that you are wrong!"

Matangini looked at both of them, trying to catch up with them and ascertain what they were talking about, but in vain. They were relentless, and with each other, they were even more unstoppable so.

For a moment, Matangini faded out the background noises, the cries, the desperation of the times and the water, and just focused on the girl in red clothes. She had only seen this little girl, filled with excitement and innocence, when she had met her for the first time before her wedding. A promising young child with a lot of hope and even more mischief in her eyes, she was like a tiny enigmatic hurricane, ready to take on the world with her pretend pride and deliberately upturned nose. Matangini always thought that only if she had reached her house in time, she would not have lost the bubbly child that Bini used to be then.

As she saw the two girls bicker, one fighting her own personal loss of her husband and the other struggling with having to live with her husband, she felt that perhaps all was not lost. Perhaps, hope was still lurking around

the corner, ready to cut in the River of Sorrows and let in the sunshine.

"Girls!" She stopped them, smiling at them lovingly, "One at a time," and to her surprise, Sulata, the 17-year-old widow, was the one who beat the 11-year-old Bini to the race.

"I think Binodini is with a child!"

Matangini, not quite processing the news completely, gasped at the overly enthusiastic revelation when Bini finally caught up.

"I think Sulata Didi is wrong! W – R – O – N – G! I am learning English!" And the little girl smirked.

A few metres away from the spot where Matangini Hazra was tending to the flood-affected people of Tamluk, a khaki-clad police constable leaned against a newly rebuilt wall of a house and made immense efforts to remain discreet. Holding the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* in front of his face, he pretended to read while keeping a constant eye on the woman. He did not trust her, nor did the British Babus. Her past record was such that they could only be sceptical of her every move. Even though the whole of Midnapore was flooded, and all the constable could see her doing was good old-fashioned social work, but who could blame them? The old lady was a nuisance, and nuisances were meant to be curbed.

The entire nation was filled with large number of Swadesis who were holding protests, observing satyagrahas, and being a pain in the neck — literally— in general, that the officials could never be too careful. 'What if they

took advantage of the calamity, and used it as a guise to usurp the government? That would be a shame, wouldn't it?' He thought, 'Better be safe than sorry.'

Each and every one of these swadesis, were under scrutiny, especially Sushil Dhara, Ajoy Mukherjee, Satish Samanta, and this Hazra woman. For outsiders she was just a poor, old, frail widow dedicated to social service, but she could fool an outsider, not him.

The constable still remembered that blazing afternoon of 1933 when he had been posted at the governor's palace. *Lat Sahib*, Sir John Anderson, the newly appointed governor, was visiting Tamluk to address a gathering. Everything could have gone smoothly without a fuss, but the swadesis created drama and ignited chaos wherever they went.

As was their nature, they decided to hold a freedom march and disrupt the peace of the land, as well as that of *Lat Sahib's*. They targeted *Lat Sahib*'s palace quite predictably, but the security cordon was tight and unbreakable. Or so he had thought. What he could not gauge was the fact that a 62-year-old woman would manage to break through their bayoneted cordon so effortlessly. So, in all fairness, neither he, nor any of his colleagues, paid any attention to this Lady in White, so much so as the crowd she had come with. Having spotted them from quite a considerable distance, the policemen anxiously threw looks at *Lat Sahib*, who had been standing regally on his balcony. Even if *Lat Sahib* had felt a tinge of tension about the approaching protesters, he did not show it. Rather, he looked quite unfazed, even amused, as he observed the march with curiosity.

When the constable saw Matangini marching in the parade's vanguard, he had had a fleeting thought about the insignificance of a widow's presence in the freedom movement, and he directed his attention at her fellow protesters instead. By the time he realised what a spectacular mistake he had committed, it had already been too late. Matangini Hazra had broken through the cordon in a split second, all the while brandishing the black banner symbolising their protest, and managed to reach directly in front of the governor's balcony. The policemen turned rather too late to take her down as she had shouted, "Go Back, *Lat Sahib*!"

The constable's blood boiled in his very veins, less so on the woman's audacity and *Lat Sahib's* momentarily broken facade of composure to reveal a somewhat terrified expression, and more so on his own incompetence. He was a part of the British police, and the British police could not afford incompetence. In that moment of uncontrolled rage, he had been vaguely aware of his colleagues' similar emotions about the incident, as they had charged quite irrationally with eyes burning red towards the protesting woman and her fellow protesters. They had beaten each of them black and blue that afternoon, mercilessly injuring the old woman.

The immediate arrest and the six months of hard labour that had followed her in prison after the incident had done little to make her see sense. The sentence had worn down the old woman considerably, and yet, she went back to her old antics the moment she was released. So if the British Babus did not trust her now, even with the flood in question, she had only herself to blame, didn't she?

The constable shook his head disapprovingly at the thought, and inadvertently lowered his copy of the *Amrita Bazar Patrika.* Suddenly, a movement in his peripheral vision caught his immediate attention. Two girls—the older one, a widow; and the younger one, clearly a *saubhagyawati* woman in a red saree—were cutting rapidly through the water and the flood of volunteers around them to reach Matangini Hazra.

All the three women were now in his direct line of sight, but from where he stood, they were out of his earshot. The girls were talking with each other in sheer excitement, and the sight of this scene made his blood boil with unbridled rage. His fingers were now clutched into tight fists and he tore the newspaper in his hands. But he did not care. The only thing he cared about was that *she* was not supposed to be here, in Alinan! She told him that she was going to Saira, to her mother's house to help her with the destruction caused by the flood. She lied to him and came to meet the Hazra woman instead? The very Hazra who tried to stop his wedding with her?

He remembered his wedding day only vaguely, since everything had to be rushed and preponed, but he definitely remembered the familiar frustration and anger that he had always felt on hearing Hazra's name, and he also remembered his new bride breaking down into inconsolable tears way before *bidaai*. He had wondered then if the breakdown was because of her disappointment that their wedding could not be stopped, but he had carelessly dismissed the thought, convinced that it was only the thought of separation from her parents, perhaps, that had invited the unwelcome tears.

He had since remained blissfully inside the same bubble. It was only now, that the bubble had burst. Binodini, his wife, stood there in front of his eyes, in the company of the woman who was nothing but a menace to the government, and Shonkar could only stand there, with his teeth clenched, feeling like a fool, for being duped by his own wife.

He took a deep, shaky breath and tried to calm himself down. He was under clear orders to only keep an eye on Hazra from a distance. He was under no authority whatsoever to do anything at all. Thus, he swallowed his anger like stinging poison for now. 'After all, duty comes first,' he thought bitterly, before raising the newspaper to hide his face again, lest the women see him, but he promised to himself that he would take care of his wife later, at his house, where he made the rules.

CHAPTER 7

WHAT THE BULBUL SAW?

Hope... is a precarious thing. It hangs by a rotten branch of an aged tree, always in fear of dropping dead, like an unprotected egg. Nevertheless, sometimes, all you want to do is hold onto it with your slender feet and sharp beak. You hold on to it and think, 'Whatever could go wrong?' When suddenly, everything is uprooted by a giant wave—everything, including your life.

When the giant waves of Damodar first attacked Bulbul's home, that is what she and her beloved mate had thought, 'Whatever could go wrong?' They had held onto hope for their unhatched eggs, tucked in the illusionary safety of their nest, which was further tucked inside a hole of an old banyan's trunk. They kept thinking, 'whatever could go wrong,' until everything went wrong at the same time.

The Damodar managed to reach the hole and take away their eggs in one swift, cruel motion, while all they could do was screech and cry in protest. Bulbul had been too shocked to accept this sudden turn of events,

while her mate had quickly recovered and taken flight after the killer wave in the direction it had supposedly taken their unborn chicks.

For days to come, even weeks, she had waited, staring in the precise direction her mate had flown off and disappeared, all this while vaguely aware of a kind human lady who kept offering her fruits and clean water to drink, and she apparently had had them too in her dazed state. But when her mate had not returned even after the water had started to subside, she had finally let go of the precarious hope. Devoid of any wish to live and fly again, Bulbul stopped eating and drinking and chose a solitary branch of the aged banyan to die in peace. Only, it wasn't all that simple with all the distracting noise of rehabilitation.

Annoyed, she shrieked out her displeasure to the humans below her, "Can a bird not even die in peace these days?" When two girls came running in the scene to the kind lady, Bulbul's curiosity was piqued as they spoke to each other, in a contest for the kind lady to hear them first. Finally, the kind lady had to chid them into silence, only to hear the taller of the two girls erupt with excitement, "I think Binodini is with a child!"

Bulbul had been around humans long enough to understand what a 'child' meant. Normally, such a statement would have delighted her. She would have been happy for the girl even, if not for the unfairness of the situation. She had to lose her eggs and her mate, but the girl gets to keep hers? Her little body shivered in a rare bubbling anger. All she wanted to do at the

moment was to launch a flight and injure the girl. She was not as cruel as the Damodar, but she wanted the girl to live with the pain.

For the first time in hours—or was it days—she wasn't sure, Bulbul flapped her wings, ready to turn her thoughts into definite actions. She shook her head, turned her neck this way and that, a couple of times, just to be sure, and spread her wings. Counting to three in her head, she pulled forward to take flight when suddenly, her eyes caught another figure standing discreetly by the human nest across the tree. This man looked much older than the girls, but the manner in which he was glaring at 'the girl with the child', he seemed to be someone known to her.

The fire in his eyes was aimed at the girl, but the flames did not spare even the Bulbul. She was halted in her preparation to fly by the glare that sent chills into her entire being. He had the same fierce look in his eyes that she could only equate with what the Damodar merely a couple of weeks ago had. After seeing the man, she herself felt favouring the girl now. She was scared for her and for her unborn chick, and after a lifetime of going on with the single thought, 'whatever could go wrong,' for the first time in her short life, she dreaded that a lot was about to go wrong for the girl.

For hours after that, Bulbul kept a protective watch over the girl until the man with fierce eyes had left the scene – which was only after the kind lady had retired to her nest, and had sent 'the girl with the child' off on a bullock cart... somewhere.

Bulbul kept staring at the bullock cart until it turned a corner and disappeared out of her sight, mulling over the decision to take flight or stay put. Finally, after her scared heartbeat refused to return to normal, she decided on the former, and took off after the bullock cart carrying 'the girl with the child'.

Bulbul was exhausted after the long flight. She chose a low branch of the palm tree, somehow standing upright and untouched by the Damodar outside the window of the girl's nest. The girl had entered the nest just moments ago. For a while, everything was still. The atmosphere of the nest, as well as the room, looked almost serene, with the cruel man sitting calmly on his rocking chair and the girl standing in front of him. He was muttering something which Bulbul could not hear. From the traumatic experience that she had, Bulbul could tell that this was just the eerie silence preceding the storm. Not averting her watchful gaze from the girl, she braced herself for what was to come.

Her instincts were right, the silence was snapped as suddenly as a lightning strike. The man shot out of his chair aggressively. For a moment, there was only silence, broken only by the echo of the slap endured by the girl, and then, the man hollered like a madman, "Get my cane!"

An elderly woman standing by him in shocked silence recovered quickly and ran out of the room to comply with the man's orders. The girl meanwhile squirmed on the floor, struggling to get up. Bulbul panicked. She

could not imagine it to get any worse than this. The woman returned with a thick wooden cane in her hands and handed it over to the man, who grabbed it and raised it to charge.

Bulbul could not bear to watch. She had to do something. Anything! So she did what she did best. She flew inside the open window, ready to peck the life out of the cruel man, even if it killed her at the end. Chirping her way in with violent flaps of her wings, she was merely seconds away from striking her target when the girl finally bellowed, "I am with a child," and the cane halted mid-air.

Matangini sat in the small hut at the edge of the village she had been invited to. A mere look at the small space indicated its abandoned status. She had never thought that the struggle for Poorna Swaraj would come to be fought from the shadows one day. The Raj had forbidden all the meetings and processions after the outbreak of World War. It made it increasingly difficult for the Congress workers to hold their meetings and plan things ahead. Even an innocent meeting to discuss the mundane activities for the day ahead perked up the Raj's ears and even the very recent natural disaster caused by Damodar had not eased them down.

Matangini was not unaware of the presence of the khaki-clad constable keeping a close watch over her during the relief work, but she rather preferred to focus on the humongous task at hand than indulge the British Raj in their insecurities. The flood had hindered the

individual Satyagraha in Tamluk, and now that the the year 1940 was coming to a close, the excitement around the movement was little, since it was not declared a mass movement. Matangini even feared that it might be suspended due to this very reason.

As she sat in the secluded hut protected by the cover of the night, a fellow Swadesi woman asked her if "this pall of hopelessness would ever clear up."

Matangini, however, could only put a consoling arm around the young woman, summoning all the warmth and hope she could muster up from within and assuring, "Remember, dear, the engulfing darkness around you can be broken by a *diya*, lamp of light. While it might seem overwhelming at the moment, have faith that we shall never cease to fight. Never give up, my dear!"

"It seems like a hopeless endeavour, Gandhi Buri."

"You call me Gandhi Buri, and yet you fail to believe in Mahatma ji."

"I do believe in Mahatma ji, but I just don't believe in myself any longer," the young woman lamented, while the others around her sighed, probably relating to her deep down.

Matangini was taken aback. While she had an indication of people losing hope gradually, she did not expect them to accept defeat without a fight so easily. This was probably why the Congress was engaging its people in constructive programmes, directing their attention towards more creative pursuits like training them in making khadi and engaging them in cottage industry.

Women were given special attention. They were trained to spin clothes, thereby redirecting their energies into promoting the home-grown industries. Cotton seeds were distributed by authorised workers in every *thana* area. These khadi spinners, majority of them women, worked tirelessly on their *charkhas* to earn themselves a living. Matangini admired how Mahatma Gandhi thought and cared about every section of society. Even the *Harijans* of Tamluk were receiving education due to his grant and two night schools were in operation for adults. If only her health allowed, she would not have thought twice about grabbing this golden opportunity to learn to read and write.

But perhaps, it was not in her destiny to change her literary status. Just like that, it was not in the destiny of the British Babus to stay in her motherland for long. She could feel it in her veins. Even though it did not seem to be happening at the moment, she knew in her very soul that a day would arrive when India would be a free bird again. Although, she could not say whether she would live to see that day or not. But that was no reason for her to stop doing her part to make the day a reality, and neither was it a reason for these youngsters to stop believing in themselves and their capabilities. After all they are the future of her motherland and they will lead the nation to its true glory one day.

"You become what you think, my dear," she said, her throat hoarse with emotion, her voice ferocious and reprimanding, "If you think yourselves to be the cause of defeat, you shall lead the country to doom.

But if you think like victors, it is you who will live to witness Bharat Maa, free from the shackles of slavery and misery—a true embodiment of the Golden Sparrow that it once was. So, lift your fallen faces, reinstate your beliefs, for you are the future of this country, and she cannot afford to lose you."

8
CHAPTER

AAMSHOTTO: THE MANGO SNACK

As the new year embarked with a renewed spirit of making the individual Satyagraha a success, Binodini was fighting her own personal battle—with herself. She knew that Gandhi Buri must have been ecstatic at being proved wrong. After all, the Satyagraha was now a mass movement; Swadesis around the country were courting arrests voluntarily to register their protest against India's participation in World War.

From the little tit-bits of information she could gather from eavesdropping, the number of arrests was in thousands. Although she did not know if anyone from the Congress was in jail or not, she did know that the movement was a massive headache for the British Raj and the British police.

"You have no idea, Bipin! You don't have to deal with these Swadesis like I have to...," Shonkar's strained voice floated inside the suffocating kitchen stuffed with smoke emanating from the hearth lit for cooking.

He says Swadesis as if it's a swear word, Binodini thought, wanting to rain down some profanities of her

own on her husband, but she knew better. If it hadn't been for her unborn child, she would not have thought twice to march out of this dreaded house and surrender herself to the British police. Perhaps, she would have been out there too, shouting in all of their faces, and perhaps her husband's as well, "Not a pie, not a man for the war effort!"

And yet, when someone whispered in her ears, "you could not have – you are too much of a coward," she jumped, only to realise that it was her own subconscious self that was mocking her from her head. 'Was that true?' She pondered. If it weren't for her child, would she have dared to protest openly? Would she have been courageous enough to step out of the shadows, or would she have hid behind Gandhi Buri and pretended to protest like she always did? After a long deliberation, however, she came to the conclusion that since she was with the child after all, such questions were impossible to answer. Although, she knew that this conclusion was just a sorry excuse for avoiding the honest answer, well... she was too much of a coward to even think about it.

So she turned her back to the entrance of the kitchen and faced the smoke. She immediately felt nauseated, and her hands flew instinctively to her mouth. Without giving a second thought to it, she ran towards the tiny veranda, where Shonkar and Bipin were sitting on their comfortable chairs, abusing the Swadesis, and vomited her insides out.

"Ore Deva! Not again!" Her husband lamented.

"It is... the smoke... *Pati Babu*," Binodini managed to explain between inhaling mouthfuls of air.

"It is always something or the other! The smell of the food... the trips to the doctor... even the morning air... for God's sake!"

"Dada, let it go. Doctor Sahib was saying that it is normal to feel sick in such a condition. But all will be fine when the baby comes, no!" Binodini squinted sharply at Bipin, who was defending her by going out of his way. When her sister-in-law appeared out of nowhere to pour *ghee* into the never-extinguishing fire, suddenly, all of the air in the veranda seemed to be less to douse down her nausea.

"Do not coddle her, Chotu Dada!" she said. Her sugary-sweet voice dripping with poison, "She will make a habit out of it."

Bipin laughed, something he often did to lighten the atmosphere, "Let it be, Boudi! I will do all the cooking for you. You will not have to lift a finger as long as I am here."

"Devi Maa! What nonsense you speak, Chotu Dada! Why would you set your feet in the kitchen! Binodini will..."

"No! Let it be, Suchitra. Let Binodini iron my clothes. You can cook something quickly for me. I am running late," and after giving commands, Shonkar folded his newspaper and vacated his chair to leave, "Oh, and Bipin, since you are in the house for the day, do impart some good sense into my wife's head. She has been mixing with the wrong sort lately," he muttered under his breath, almost cursing, and then left, leaving a wide- eyed Bipin, and a pouty Suchitra by themselves. Binodini, on the other hand, followed him to his room, and sighed inwardly.

She had been married to him for more than three years now, and yet, she could not bring herself to think of it as her room, let alone theirs. Every morning, she woke up in this very room, and felt like a stranger, intruding into the life of a man who she knew, but did not want to be associated with. Their conversations were limited, almost non- existent, for he only spoke directly to her when it was absolutely necessary. He expected his orders to be complied with even before they were discharged. Perhaps he exercised authority that he did not possess at his workplace, over this house, in order to compensate. To feel as though he was in power. In control.

In the initial months of their marriage, she had resisted as hard as she could. Because of her mother's abandonment, and countless beatings from her sister-in-law, she had finally been tamed. Or so he had believed, until he found her "mixing with the wrong sort."

Nevertheless, her tamed version woke up before the Sun, cleaned the house, bathed with ice cold water, cooked for the household, prepared and packed his lunch, fetched the newspaper, readied his clothes, readied his bath, woke him up, prepared tea and the morning meal for the household, waited for additional orders while he read the newspaper and had his tea, helped him get ready, and then saw him off at the door.

It did not end there. The real work began after he left. For Suchitra did in his absence what he did when he was present—pretended that she exercised control.

If only Binodini could show her the mirror. But alas! She had been tamed. That didn't stop Suchitra from raising both, her hands and voice at her whenever

she got the chance or the excuse. In fact, Binodini had almost forgotten what her face looked like. It was only now that she had been reminded of her cheeks' true colour by the mirrors of the household as Suchitra had been ordered to keep her hands to herself as long as Binodini was with a child – Shonkar's heir, who he was so sure was going to be a boy.

As she inspected her cheeks in the mirror, she found them surprisingly blot free. The hardness of the skin beneath her eyes, however, would take some time to leave.

"What are you doing? Are my clothes ready?" Shonkar shouted in her ear.

Binodini, slightly startled, turned and assured, "Yes, of course," and dashed towards the bed to fetch his ironed uniform.

Handing it to him one after the other, while he changed out of his *dhoti-kameez* into the uniform, she stared at one of the tiny cracks on the floor, finding it much more fascinating than the man in front of her. After he changed, she looked up and fought the repulsive voice begging to scream, "Traitor!" to his face.

Hours later after Shonkar had left, and Suchitra had gone off to a neighbour's, Binodini found herself sitting unnaturally still by the window of his room, taking in all the sunlight she could get in the cold January weather. The index finger of her left hand served as a bookmark, while the book in question itself lay folded in her lap, ignored.

"That book is not going to read itself," his voice startled her out of her reverie, as she turned to acknowledge his presence. Dressed in his usual cotton shirt and white *dhoti*, he did not look any different from the last time she had seen him, and yet, he was a refreshing presence nonetheless.

"Here to impart some good sense into my head?" She asked in a singsong voice, and Bipin laughed, the sound of his laughter filling and replacing the emptiness of her husband's room.

"On the contrary, I'm here to get some lessons from you..." he paused as she raised her eyebrows, then confirmed in inquiry, "on the art of being stupid enough to get caught when you are supposed to be working from the shadows," he emphasised the last phrase in a shrill voice meant to imitate hers and she scowled.

"Do not be insufferable!" She muttered and he laughed again.

"Here," he said, "this might cheer you up," he rummaged inside his large shirt pocket and pulled out a leather bound book, which she immediately snatched out of his hand, not giving him the chance to raise it above his head out of her reach to trouble her. Caressing the front cover with careful fingers, she read the title, *Chokher Bali*, by Rabindranath Tagore. For the first time in days, no, weeks, she felt herself smiling—and God! Did her smile muscles hurt?

"Do you know the protagonist's name?" Bipin intruded.

"What?"

"Binodini," he said, and her smile widened even more.

She flipped open the pages randomly, feeling their coarseness, which felt much softer and better than the finest silks Suchitra's travelling trader husband sometimes got for his wife from Madras. She sniffed the pages, inhaling the scent of their newness, allowing herself to get lost in their sensations for a minute. Then, she got down to business, flipping each and every page to look for the tiny letters inked discreetly between the lines of the story. It took her a while, but after a close inspection, she finally found the date, place and time of the next meeting of Swadesis.

It was scheduled to be held a couple of days later at the Khadi centre located at an hour's distance, but she doubted if she would be able to make it. Sighing disappointedly, she closed the book and leaned back against the window frame with a dejected slouch.

"Do not be sad," Bipin attempted to comfort her, "You should focus on the baby. She needs you to be happy."

"She? How can you know it's a girl?" Binodini was amused.

"I do not know. I just feel you would want a girl."

"I do, indeed," she sighed, "but Shonkar does not. He is certain that it is going to be a boy."

"Shonkar does not know a thing!" Bipin said it with so much poison in his voice that even Binodini was taken aback. As a fellow Swadesi, she knew Bipin did not find Shonkar agreeable, to say the least, but it was the first time she had heard a hint of contempt for him in his voice. He seemed to have read her expressions, for his own features softened as he said, "He vexes me," and she giggled.

"Do not mock me. You have no idea how hard it is to pretend otherwise," he said, crossing his arms.

"Oh well...I have some idea! I have to live with him, while you...you get to attend school and freedom processions in the name of school. All without getting a beating from your husband and your sister-in-law.

"Fair enough," Bipin conceded, serious again.

For a while, none of them spoke a word. However, they did not find the silence uncomfortable. They were way past that now. Rather, they found silence companionable and peaceful. At least, as peaceful as it could be in the turbulent times they lived in. Binodini could even dare to say that these tiny moments she spent with Bipin were the only fragments of time she looked forward to after three years of knowing him. She knew far too much about him than he could otherwise reveal, and he knew far too much about her than she could dare to let on.

Perhaps, this uncommon friendship with someone from the opposite sex was the closest she could get to the normalcy of her carefree maiden days. Bipin was an escape, an oasis in the middle of a hopeless desert, who brought joy and fear with him whenever he came from Kolkata. Joy of seeing him, fear of losing him. But as she was with him now, she discarded the fear for a while and tried to focus on the joy, which was elated even further when he rummaged through his pockets again, and even before he had pulled it out, she knew what it was.

"*Aamshotto*!" She jumped in delight to grab the snack he always brought for her with him, which he managed to raise above his head, out of her reach to trouble her.

As she jumped to try and reach it, the moment of peace and joy came shattering down into pieces. The fear returned along with a shooting pain in her abdomen.

The newspaper-wrapped *Aamshotto* slipped out of his hand, Bipin panicked as she bowled over in agony, "What is wrong...," he screamed, "Bini, what is...," he cut himself short when he saw the blood—soaking her saree, "nooo...." Binodini had lost the child.

9
CHAPTER

A SWADESI'S BLOOD

As the season changed, so did the mood of people. Matangini saw everything, observed everything. From time to time, Bipin brought news about Bini, "She has had another miscarriage, but she is regaining health," he would say, his downcast eyes betraying his reassuring words. Matangini would give the 15-year-old a long, hard look, but the boy would not budge. He stubbornly refused to say the truth and stood his ground firmly until it was time for him to take his leave.

He would go off to his school in Calcutta, or head back to Bini's place. When it was the latter, Matangini understood that Bini was not regaining her health after all, and when it was the former, she would worry a little less. Either way, she would not cease to worry, even though she knew it did her body or mind no good. She wished that Bini would heed her advice and fight back her in-laws as much as she was willing to fight the British Raj. But she could only advise, it was up to Bini to do or not.

But she did understand Bini's dilemma—her fear. The girl was just twelve. The same age as Matangini had been when her Baba had married her off to her husband. Oh, it was so long ago that she had to strain her memory to recall the events clearly. She did not even remember her father's face, as much as she had endeavoured to keep it alive in her memory for all these years. But the only thing she remembered now was how kind he was, and how his soothing voice used to lull her to sleep when she was little.

But her Baba was a poor peasant. Working at a landlord's field tirelessly for hours, he could earn barely enough to afford them two square meals a day, let alone provide Matangini with a formal education. Moreover, back in those days, literacy in a girl was perceived as a demerit rather than a desired quality. Even now, girls are not educated for their own growth. Education is merely seen as a bonus point so that their children do not suffer due to their lack of one.

People believed that no good parent who cared about their daughter would keep her unmarried at their house after she had hit puberty. A daughter was supposed to be tied in matrimony, and packed off to her husband's house to bear him offspring as soon as possible, for that was her sole purpose in life. The only education that she was meant to receive was one which would teach her to take care of household and bring up her children.

Hence, her Baba had done what he deemed best for her. He had married her off to, Trilochan Hazra. Trilochan had not been a bad person, but he had been around sixty at the time of their wedding, almost the same age as her Baba's. They had nothing in common,

nothing to talk about or share. But still, she tried her best to conform with society's ideals of being a good wife. She cooked, she cleaned, looked after Trilochan and his son from his late first wife.

It had been strange, the whole family dynamic. Her stepson was older than her by a few years, and perhaps for this reason, among others, he had never been able to warm up to her. Yet, somehow her new family found and established a routine of their own over the years. She could not say that they were happy, but there had been a harmonious cohabitation and even contentment, she dared say, between them. But the peace did not last long.

Just after six years of their marriage, Trilochan passed away at sixty-six. For a few days after his passing away, Matangini could not even comprehend the truth in its entirety. At the young age of 18, she was stripped off of all the colours in her life and was forced wear white for the rest of her life. The change had been so sudden and the shock so immense that she had thought that nothing worse could ever happen to her again, when her stepson proved her wrong.

"I do not want you in my house," he said, "you have been a harbringer of bad luck for my family!"

Her neighbours had been sympathetic, yet none of them said a word against her stepson. They say that a saint's silence is much greater of a sin than a sinner's words? For it harms an innocent soul more than the evil itself. Perhaps this thought was what had kept her going at the time. That she had no one but herself to stand up for and look after her. So she had found a purpose – to help those who could not help themselves.

Her life went on between Hogla, her father's village, and Alinan, her husband's village, where she had established a separate cottage for herself, until she heard about Mahatma Gandhi, and her life changed forever. She finally found her true calling. A call to give her all to the nation. To think beyond Hogla, Alinan, Tamluk, and even Bengal, and play her part in liberating her motherland. It was as if she had been living in a bubble her entire life. As if she was finally waking up from a deep slumber after years of dreaming in ignorance.

It all started when Gunadhar Bhaumik, the local school teacher, inspired Matangini to join the freedom struggle. How many years have passed since then? Eight? Nine? Ten? It had been many, she knew, enough for her to build a sense of utmost respect for the man. Gunadhar had always been upfront with his revolt, leaving the people whose lives he touched in more ways than one in awe. In order to follow the path laid down by Mahatma Gandhi, he eventually left his job and focused on the freedom movement entirely. Matangini could not help, but admire his dedication. Even though he was a family man, his first most loyalty lay with his nation.

Over the past few years, Gunadhar's hut had become a meeting place for the revolutionaries, until one night, the police came to hunt him down, and not finding him there, harassed and looted his poor family before leaving. Even his young son had been left bleeding by those lost souls. Matangini knew that he was a bright kid as she had met him and had seen a light so strong in those hopeful eyes, which could melt away all the pessimism around the stressful times they lived in. A similar kind of light that she saw in Bini's eyes. The

light that promised a better future. These children were the future, and even though Bini was dazed and blinded by her own plight she was unable to see the light in her eyes when she saw herself in the mirror. Matangini knew that the moment was not far away when the girl would see in herself, the same potential that she saw in her. It was only a matter of time.

Binodini shut her eyes tightly in the face of the harsh truth. What was the point of seeing anyway, if all her eyes could capture was pain and suffering? Right in front of her eyes, she had lost three babies back to back. None of her pregnancies lasted more than five apprehensive and stressful months.

Every morning, when she woke up, she was forced to go back to her old routine with the hollowness that insisted on eating her from inside like a parasite. Every night, Shonkar came back to heap all of his frustration of dealing with the revolutionaries on her. Doctor Babu had clearly said, "No more pregnancies, Binodini. There is no way your body can handle another one," and instead of heeding to his advice, Shonkar dismissed him from any future services and made 'having a son' his life mission.

So this night, she closed her eyes when he embarked on his daily torture on her, however they were mercifully intervened by a loud shattering of his bedroom's window pane. Terrified Binodini hurriedly tried to inspect the situation. However, Shonkar was faster. He had already scooped up the paper-wrapped stone that had been

launched from outside their house—one of the only few *pakka* ones in the village.

Unwrapping the paper from the stone, his widened eyes turned bloodshot after reading the message. For a few seconds, he did not say a word, and when Binodini asked him what the message said, he growled and crushed the paper in his shaking fist. Throwing the paper violently on the floor, he stormed out. Binodini stared at him for a few moments until she heard the main door of the house banged, producing an echo in the silent night.

Picking up the paper from the distant corner of the bedroom, she straightened it to make sense of the words smeared in red ink, but as she read the message, she dropped the paper down in horror.

"We swear this blood will be yours next time, traitor!"

It was no red ink; it was blood! Blood of a Swadesi, no less. Probably, his loved one had faced the brunt of the police's brutality. Shonkar's brutality.

Just the thought of being a wife to such a man disgusted her. She suddenly started feeling sick. As if that was not enough, she had an unwanted visitor.

"Binodini! What did you do?" Suchitra's piercing voice was the last thing she needed at the moment, and yet here she was, "Why did Dada leave in such a rage, in the dead of the night in his uniform? What did you do? Will you speak or... Ore Devi Ma!" Suchitra jumped back as Binodini's sickening feeling found its way out of her mouth and splashed the entire front of Suchitra's saree.

"You wretch! What did you do!" Suchitra started yelling again, her words ringing in the night air, crashing at Binodini's ears, but not quite reaching her dazed

brain. She had had enough! If she had to bear any of this torture for a second longer, she would go mad.

Not being able to think of any other effective means to shut her sister-in-law up, Binodini flared her nostrils a little, scrunched her brows and puffed up her cheeks to pretend like another bout of puke was on its way to land on Suchitra's saree. Suchitra's eyes widened and the vexing stream of her words finally stopped midway. Managing to spit out just two parting words, "Oh no," she hastily grabbed the folds of her saree and ran away, as if for her life.

Seeing her retreating so comically, Binodini felt something bubbling inside her stomach, aching to find its way out of her mouth again. But when she opened it to let it out, she realised that it was the laughter instead of the rest of her dinner. She looked into the mirror and stared at her own reflection breaking into an uncontrollable chortle. Her entire face had swollen red and her eyes were overflowing with five years of pent up frustration, anger and a lost sense of joy. The more she looked at herself, the more she struggled to stop herself from laughing and crying at the same time. But when finally, she stopped and looked into the mirror again, she saw her true self instead of the miserable shadow she had been forced to be for half a decade. At this moment, she knew, that she was beginning to break free.

10
CHAPTER

THE SMELL OF ASH

Binodini felt saturated. It was too much information to absorb in half an hour. In her personal grief, she had completely lost touch with the outside world over the past many months. Whenever Bipin used to visit her, he would be too busy consoling her, distracting her from her pain, or when she was pregnant, telling her to take proper care. Even when she used to ask about the progress of the revolution, he would deflect the conversation to other unimportant things. But now, with Shonkar spending his days and nights at duty, she was no longer pregnant or recovering from a miscarriage. And she wanted to catch up.

"So...Tagore ji is no more!"

"Hmm...."

"And... and... Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose has escaped to Germany?"

"Hmm..."

"And...Tamluk is now an emergency area?"

"That means no buses to commute?"

"Hmm...."

"Because they think the Japanese may invade?"

"Do you think they will?"

"Hmm..." cough, "I...Hmm...."

"What?"

"I don't know? Burma has already been invaded. The British are panicking. They have imposed the Denial Policy. They're confiscating rice from farmers, tossing tons and tons of it into the sea, lest the Japanese get their hands on the surplus if they manage to invade from Bengali coast."

"Why do you sound mad?" Binodini narrowed her eyes.

"Because I am mad, Binodini!" Bipin retorted, "you sneaked out of the house to find someone to smuggle a letter to me, which said, "Emergency! Make Haste!"

Binodini did not understand, "and?"

"And? And your emergency was that you wanted News, Binodini!"

"Well...," Binodini looked around sheepishly, wringing her fingers around the tail of her saree like a scolded child, not knowing what to say.

"Stop pouting like a 3- year- old!" Bipin crossed his arms and stared at her.

"Well...you know Shonkar has banned all the newspapers from the house. The Raj is making it all the more difficult to communicate, and even visiting Kamla's house to listen to the radio is useless! They have censored everything! I did not know how to catch up. So I thought someone from Calcutta would be more helpful...."

"Bini...I took...."

"...The first train you got, did not even change out of your school uniform.... Yes, you have mentioned it a hundred times. Bipin! Stop wasting time. You were telling me about the Cripps Mission! Nonod ji would be back any minute."

Bipin sighed, "Fine! The Cripps Mission has failed as well. Their Prime Minister, Churchill, sent a senior British minister to negotiate an agreement with our leaders. Cripps met Mahatma, Nehru, even Jinnah and asked for India's cooperation in the World War and in return promised to conduct elections and give us a chance to have our own government. But again... they refused the demand of complete independence. They still want India to be their dominion."

For a couple of minutes, they sat in the living room in silence – Bipin giving his jaw some rest, Binodini absorbing the situation.

She could not believe that she had been so unaware. She was torturously cocooned into these abominable four walls, trapped within her own pain and grief, while thousands of people outside this house were suffering every minute and every second of their lives. At least she had food, a shelter for protection, while others..."

Bipin's concerned, but stern voice cut into her thoughts. She looked up at him and noticed how he was sitting cross-legged on a cushioned chair with such an ease, that seemed he was extremely comfortable in his suspender supported English trousers and fancy buttoned-up English shirt. "I just ran to catch a train, Binodini!"

"What?" She asked.

"I know what you are thinking. Do not compare your grief with someone else's. Just because you are in a relatively privileged position, does not mean that your suffering is not valid."

Binodini gasped slightly. Bipin had read her mind. Perhaps he was right as well. But it was not that easy to let go of one's guilt, now, was it? Nevertheless, she was now determined to brush the past few months under the carpet and only look for...

"Did you hear that?" Bipin asked.

Binodini strained her ears and she did. Someone was crying, no, wailing outside the house. Her first thought was that someone must have died, but she prayed that she was wrong. She stood up and followed Bipin out, pulling the tail of her saree up to her head on the way.

As they approached the main door, they heard a man's anguished voice, "You will all die! You, your brother, your husband, your whole family! You cannot live in peace after destroying the lives of us poor! God will punish you with a horrible end! You will burn in hell!"

"Enough! Shut your ugly mouth up!"

Binodini saw Bipin's hand freeze at the handle. They both recognised this voice too well. Without thinking, she took charge, let herself out of the door and Bipin followed her hurriedly.

The sight outside the house horrified her. She recognised the wailing middle-aged man as one of the villagers belonging to one of those families she was not allowed to interact with. Despite Mahatma ji's efforts for uplifting the Harijan community, people like her husband and sister-in-law remained stubbornly rooted

to the rotten traditions. Nevertheless, she strained to recall his name. Was it Shubhoj? Subir? But her mind could not focus on anything else other than the sack full of ash that the man had spilled out in front of their entrance. His red, blistered hands were beating the heap of the still hot gray powder as if they had a life of their own, filling the April air with the heady smell of ash. *Was it... a person's?* Binodini could not breathe.

"Stop it! Stop this nonsense this very instant!" Suchitra was shouting at him.

"This ash... It is not just the burnt remains of my family's lives, Suchitra Devi! This is your family's future! You will burn in hell!"

"Stop your drama, it was just a boat!" Suchitra yelled again, covering her nose and mouth with her saree as a protection from the ash.

"Just a boat? Just a boat? Do you hear this, fellows, do you all hear what this rich, entitled woman living in this big, menacing house says?" He called out to the gathered group of curious neighbours, giving Binodini a moment to feel relieved that the ashes did not belong to a human, but still bewildered all the same.

"Just a boat, she says! Of course, it was just a boat to you, for what would you know about the life of a poor fisherman. His boat is his whole life. The only source of income. Yet, you say, it was just... a boat."

At this point, Bipin stepped forward and went to crouch beside the desolate man before Suchitra could stop him, "Dada, please calm down. Bini, go and fetch a glass of water please?"

When Binodini turned towards the door, Suchitra grabbed her arm in a painful clutch.

"What do you think you are doing?" She hissed.

"Fetching a glass of water," Binodini replied

"For him?" She spewed the word like poison, and Binodini wondered if she could hate this woman more, when she turned back to Bipin and answered her unspoken query, "Chhotu Dada, you must not bother yourself with vermins. Let us go inside."

"Do not utter such disrespectful words, Boudi," Bipin said coldly before turning back to the man, "who did this, Sukhi Dada?"

Sukhi's neck snapped up to Bipin, "Who do you think did this, none other than your revered brother- in-law? Do you think anyone else could be more capable?" All of a sudden, Sukhi's eyes rolled up, as if he was going into a trance, and his voice became hauntingly distant, "They came at the river bank even before the Sun was up. Those cowards! Marching towards our boats in that dreaded khaki uniform with lit torches in their cruel hands. We were awake, all of us, preparing to sail to feed our families. But we only spotted them when it was already too late. Our precious boats went up in flames and lightened up the whole bank as if they were a thousand suns burning at the same time!

"You would ask what we did to prevent it, wouldn't you? Why, of course we rushed to the banks, demanding for answers, why our only means of subsistence was torched up... why our families are subjected to a life of empty stomachs and unending tears... and do you know what we got in answer? Why, of course, only the beating from their canes. What are we, but mere vermins of this wretched society? We are... nothing..."

The silence that followed those heart-wrenching words was voluminous and echoing. Binodini could feel the heat of the fishermen's burning boats, and her eyes burnt with unshed tears. The guilt returned, and this time, it threatened to bury her deep in the boils of hell in shame.

The British were now destroying boats as well. Why? Lest the Japanese should use them? So much in the name of protecting a land that was never theirs to be called in the first place!

"Dada, let me help you. Here..." Bipin was the first to recover. He rummaged through his pocket and found some money, probably his monthly allowance, and tried to give it to Sukhi.

"No... no... do you think this can help us now, child? We do not want this money. No... it is too less a compensation for what your brother-in-law has snatched away from us... we might be vermins for you, but we have our self-respect."

"Dada, please keep this... build a new boat..."

"No... no... you cannot burn down a man's house, and then offer him a glass of water to build it again. Keep your money, for even your money is cursed..."

With these ominous words, Sukhi pulled himself up from the mud and turned away from Bipin, who held his arm around the older man's shoulder. With bent, defeated shoulders, he started to scoop up all the ash back into the sack, "I must immerse it in the river," he said, "it is the only right thing to do..."

No one, not even Suchitra said a word, nor did anyone come forward to help the broken man. Everyone knew that it was something that he just had to do alone.

By himself. Without any assistance. Even though it took him double the time to do the task with his blistered hands, which he had probably used to try and save his beloved boat. It was not just the ashes of a boat, but of his very pride that he was trying to gather.

After long, excruciating minutes that felt like hours, Sukhi finally loaded the sack on his worn-down shoulders and walked away.

CHAPTER 11

DO OR DIE

When Binodini reached Swadesi Ajoy Mukherjee' house along with Bipin, the meeting had already commenced. The humid July air had made their journey irritable. They had to travel miles on foot to reach their destination because there were no buses, or even bicycles to commute. As they left the house in the wee hours to avoid detection, commuting by cart was also out of question. But now, as they slipped inside Ajoy Dada's backyard, Binodini felt much more relaxed. However, the people before them were far from relaxed, she realised this after a couple of moments.

"What do you suggest then, Dada Babu?" She heard a young man say from one of the front rows, "The situation is getting out of hand. We don't fear death, Dada Babu, as long as it comes calling on us while fighting for the motherland. But losing the battle of life to hunger? It is such a waste!"

There was a murmur of agreement in the backyard, when another man, who she vaguely remembered as one of the volunteers in the flood relief work two years ago,

said, "Boats, buses, bicycles, rice... they have snatched away everything, Satish Dada..."

"That's why we are raising our own army, *Vidyut Bahini*, Hari." It was Satish Samant, replying to the young man who she saw nodding from behind, "We do not trust the British Raj. We have no reason to. We fear, in fact, that they might run away at the first sight of the Japanese. The time has come that we must fight for ourselves against the British rule, and the Japanese if it comes to that. Workers from Sutahata and Mahishadal *thanas* are training Swadesis like you to fight for our motherland. In fact, even women are been coming forward to join the sister corp, *Bhagini Sena Sibir*.

"*Vidyut Bahini*, The Lightning Armies," Binodini mused. Binodini's eyes lit up. Satish Dada was describing in detail what all the volunteers were supposed to do, and she kept nodding to each one of the tasks. She would volunteer to collect rice and paddy. She would become fearless. She would resist oppression, and if needed she would march against the Raj and its police to drive them away from the motherland.

"The time to fear war and the oppression of British rule is over," it was Ajoy Babu who was speaking now, "Satish Babu here, and Dhara Babu, as you must know him, have exhausted their efforts in trying to stop the authorities from exporting our rice and paddy, but alas, their ears have long stopped listening to the sound advice. The authorities are arresting our workers, throwing them into prison without trial like flies out of milk. But we know who we are, we are Swadesis, we are the Satyagrahis, and we must refuse to bow down to the British anymore, we deserve an independent, self

government. We need Swaraj! And we will do everything to attain Swaraj. Soon friends, we must fight this war against the British Raj. We must have our Swaraj, and we shall die having it! Bande Mataram!"

"Bande Mataram!!"

An echo rang into the air, so loud that Binodini wondered how come the police hadn't come barging in here yet. But she also knew the answer. Ajoy Babu's words had driven away every last drop of fear from the Swadesis, and charged them with a palpating energy which screamed and demanded for Swaraj. So even if the police had heard them from miles away from their *thanas*, she doubted if they would dare to come. So she filled her lungs with air and raised her voice to chant with everyone else, but even with this dizzying energy, she was not unaware of the loudest voice of them all, rising from the front row, of the Lady in White—Gandhi Buri.

Shonker felt perpetually tired. Lock-ups were overcrowded with Swadesis. They were ordered to arrest them for any and every reason they could conjure. But like Draupadi's saree, their number kept on increasing, and it was becoming nearly impossible to manage them. He hadn't been home for almost a month now. Although his sister kept on sending him long letters every week to assure that everything was alright, he doubted if his wife would let it remain alright for long.

The situation was tense. The Congress was holding meetings non-stop, everyone knew that a big revolution,

perhaps the biggest the British Babus had ever seen, was coming. The Denial Policy of the British was not helping either. Not that Shonkar was allowed to have any opinions, but even he could not deny that the British Raj was going overboard to push people against them than they already were. People were mobilising all over the country and Tamluk was not far behind. Despite the ban imposed on meetings and processions, Swadesis kept finding new ways to defy the rules. Now they were even raising their own armies! What was the police supposed to do if this army suddenly decided to take over? He was aware that due to Gandhi advocating non-violent protests, it was unlikely that these armies would take up arms, but one wrong step from the British Raj and their empire could crumble down like a castle of cards before their very eyes.

But Shonkar obeyed what he was asked to do. He burned down boats, snatched away cycles, beat up the protesters, took away their paddy for export... the list went on and on, and within no time, he was left catching merely a couple hours of sleep in a shack near the Tamluk police station.

He was not used to this—looking after himself, doing all the chores, eating burnt food. That's why, he decided to take a little time off to pay a visit home and get his wife to do what actually her job was. Tired, but with his head held high, he paddled his way home on his bicycle. He felt the stares, hundreds of them, all along the muddy path—judging him, hating him, trying to shoot him down with venomous arrows released from their angry eyes, but he kept paddling stubbornly. He would be lying if he said that he wasn't scared, even

King George and Churchill were scared, but he would be damned if he let it on. He refused to be bogged down by the intimidating presence of onlookers, for he knew that the only weapon they were equipped with was *Ahimsa*.

After forty-five minutes of paddling, he reached house. He would have to take the bicycle inside because he thought it wasn't safe in the verandah. Keeping a tight hold on the handles, he walked up to the door and called out for his sister. But he did not get any response. He called out again. He tried the latch, and called out, yet again, he didn't receive any response. Puzzled, he wondered if they had gone out somewhere, but it was unlike them to step out during the evening hours.

Just then, he heard the echoing sound of temple bells from the Kali temple. He thought that perhaps, the sister-in-laws had buried the hatchet miraculously and went up to the temple together for evening prayers. But then, he heard the clanking of a glass, and his head snapped up to the door. So they were inside. *Have they gone deaf?*

With breath quickening to subdue his anger, he called out again, "Suchitra! Binodini, open up!"

"I can't," was the faint reply from the other side.

"Suchitra? What is wrong? Open the door!"

"I can't," his sister repeated again, "Dada, you would kill me," her voice was laced with fear, which was so unlike her, that it filled him with dread as well. With as calm a voice he could conjure, he pleaded with her, "I promise I will not, sister! Open the door."

"You are scaring me Suchitra," he spoke when his sister did not budge, "open the door or I will have to

break it," but when she did not reply, he made a quick decision. Pulling down the stand of the bicycle, he backed away, taking a few steps back to crash open the door. He feared the days of pain that would torture his ageing shoulder, but he had to do it anyway. But just when he was about to make a run towards the door, it flew open, and he halted in his tracks with the suddenness that almost landed him top-down on the bicycle.

Pulling himself straight, he shouted, "What is the matter with...."

"She's gone," Suchitra cut him short, hyperventilating in the dim evening light.

"What?"

"Your wife, Dada, she is gone."

It took Shonkar some time to process her words, and he could not help but curse himself aloud.

"She just ran away when I was sleeping. I did not hear her go. She was just... gone before I woke up." His sister started to explain.

"When?" He cut her off this time.

"Huh?"

"When?"

"A... a week ago," his sister whispered and he almost did not hear her. Almost... and yet, he asked again just to be sure, "when?"

"More... more than a week ago," she said it aloud, but stammered this time.

By the time she finished the sentence, he was towering over her, dangerously close, itching to strangle her with his bare hands. Only one thought kept him from turning his thoughts into action, 'she is someone else's *Sompotti.*' So he walked away. Pulling up his bicycle

stand with a violent kick, he climbed onto it and paddle furiously out of the house into the darkening night. He had come home as a proud man and now he was returning as a humiliated one.

Nearly ten days into the August of 1942, Shonkar's fears came true. On 8th August, Gandhi headed the Bombay session of All India Congress Committee and launched the Quit India Movement, demanding complete independence. The Cripps Mission aimed at garnering India's support in the World War had failed, and since then, the British Raj had been anticipating a full-fledged revolution. Nonetheless they were prepared. Next day, Gandhi, Nehru and almost all of the Congress leaders were arrested. News took time to fly into the entire country, but sure it did.

Shonkar and his colleagues found out that Gandhi had left instructions for the remaining leaders in case of arrest of all major leaders that was sure to follow. He suspected chaos and anarchy, and instructed that the reaction that would follow was not be suppressed until the goal of the Swadesi was achieved. So much for *Ahimsa*, Shonkar pondered, 'What's next? Jailbreaks? Taking up arms? Going to full-fledged war with the Raj?' He thought that the Swadesis were being downright irrational. They could never win! Or could they?

Calcutta was already reacting to the arrest of the leaders. Markets were being shut down, bus drivers refused to do their jobs and the police had to resort to *lathi* charge. It did not take long for the mass struggle

to reach Midnapore. When the local leaders who had attended the Bombay Conference returned to Bengal, they brought with them the papers carrying Gandhi's last message before his arrest. Although many copies were seized at the Howrah station, the complete batch could not be contained. The news of the wholesale arrest and the onset of the Quit India Movement was spreading like wildfire, and the protests began to rise.

Shonkar held one of the copies in front of him and frowned. It was a clear call for war. Gandhi's words stared back at him and instilled a creeping fear in his heart. With trembling hands and sweat trickling down his forehead, he read the words aloud to his colleagues:

"Every man is free to go to the fullest length under *Ahimsa*. Complete deadlock by strikes and all other possible non-violent means. Satyagrahis should go out to die and not to live. It is only when individuals go out to seek and face death that the nation will survive..."

Swallowing hard to hydrate his fear-clogged throat, he read the last three words that were about to change history, "Do or Die!"

12
CHAPTER

THE LAST MEAL

Mahatma Gandhi's message soon spread like wildfire in Midnapore. True to his principles, he expected his soldiers to protest in non-violent ways. When Matangini came to think of it, which she often did, violence was what came naturally to humans. After all, humans are primarily animals. But those who overcame these primitive instincts and rose above to endure the more difficult path of *Ahimsa*, were the ones who became humans in the truest sense. It was not in vain that Tagore had given the title *Mahatma* to Gandhi.

Matangini did believe in fighting for one's rights, but this fight was more internal than external – with one's own emotions. Mahatma Gandhi was in jail again, and however much it pained his followers, they could not cease to fight the war that he had started. So the Satyagrahis met in the internal folds of their villages, where it was more difficult for the police to reach them. Ajoy Babu, who was forced to be in hiding, was their natural leader, and the one responsible for bringing them all the news and instructions from the District

Council of Action, formed by Congress. He was much younger than Matangini and more like a son to her, but his leadership skills amazed her as much as they did anyone else. She looked up to him and respected him for his hard work. She saw in him, the future leader of Bengal and wished that she could see him touch every pinnacle of success. But death was the ultimate truth, and if she had not been aware of her impending one before, what happened on the 8th September did.

She heard it from Ajoy Babu and it pained her heart to even imagine the incident. The police had gone down to Danipur to aid the rice mill owners in exporting their produce. Since no Congress volunteers were present at the site, the villagers, numbering over 2000 had to gather in protest. Matangini could visualise the tussle—the villagers trying to protect themselves from starving, and the police opening fire and ending up killing three of the unsuspecting ones.

"When the Congress officials were informed, they immediately sent 40 volunteers on the spot, who were joined by 6000 villages," Ajoy Babu reiterated, "They would not even hand over the dead bodies, Gandhi Buri! Even after eventually promising that they would hand them over after the post mortem, they were heartlessly thrown away into the river," he choked over his words, and Matangini's eyes welled up with tears.

As Ajoy continued further, she saw herself as one of the villagers, diving into the river and recovering the dead bodies, wanting the families of those innocent souls to have the chance of conducting the last rites of their loved ones with respect. But the British Raj did not understand the concept of dignity. She saw the police

snatching away the bodies from her and burning them all in a single pyre. 'So cruel, so barbaric', she thought, and shook her head. 'Were these police officers not Indians? Did they have a different ancestry than us?'

"They did not stop at this, Gandhi Buri," Ajoy continued, "they raided the neighbouring villages, arrested hundreds of villagers and denied them food. Although, the sacrifice of those martyrs did not go in vain! The mill owners had to bow down at last. They agreed to not export paddy, and I heard that some compensation was also paid to the families of the departed souls, but...," he trailed off.

"But what is money only our hands' dirt?" Matangini completed his thought, "how will this dirt bring back lost lives? Or the chance to send them off with the respect they deserved?"

The two Satyagrahis fell silent and found themselves incapable of saying anything further. Matangini knew that the Danipur incident was only the beginning. The Swadesis were determined to organise peaceful protests and *Hartals* in Tamluk, following the principle of *Ahimsa*, as Mahatma ji wanted; But the British rule was not Gandhian. And that is how she knew that she was nearing her death. But she had no regrets. Even if she could not breathe the sweet air of free India, she would die peacefully, knowing that her fellow Indians would. So over the coming days, she joined the Quit India Movement or the August revolution as it had come to be called, and fought the war against the British rule.

The Congress built many camps before the start of the revolution. But as the fight commenced, the Satyagrahis kept on increasing in number and so did the

camps. The British, however, were brutal as ever, and kept destroying them. But the Satyagrahis had come way past their intimidating tactics. They built them again, and again, and kept the fight going.

As September reached its final week, Satyagrahis had had enough. Merely boycotting the government offices was not enough. The time had come to take them over and establish a self-government.

"Five days from now, on 29th September, we shall leave our camps to create history! We shall march in thousands to take over government offices, courts, and police stations. Today, we're not Hindus, we're not Mahomedans. We are not Brahmins, we're not Harijans. We do not belong to Tamluk, or Mahishadal, or Kukrahati or Balughata. We do not belong to Bengal! We are all Indians! We belong to India! We shall march, five days from now, to Do or to Die! Bande Mataram!"

"Bande Mataram!" Matangini echoed the chant after Ajoy Babu, her voice becoming one with the hundreds of Satyagrahis around her. From the corner of her eye, she could spot Bini, Bipin and Sulata among several other youths, some older, some even younger than them, and her heart swelled with pride. The nation was in the right hands.

Binodini scurried through the crowd to reach Gandhi Buri. It was not as simple as it looked. She was surrounded with scores of women, even some men, all of whom wished to have a word with her over the upcoming march. She only had one advice for each of them, "Be

brave. Do not fear the police, but keep the plans of the procession from reaching their ears. Mahatma ji has left clear instructions. Five days from now, when we would leave our houses, we would go to die, not to live!"

The excitement around her was infectious. Binodini could feel the nervous energy pouring in and out of her. For many of them, these were going to be the last five days of their lives, but none of the faces around her showed even a tinge of regret. As Binodini navigated her way towards the Lady in White, she wondered if she would regret losing her life in the march. When she finally reached to the front and bent to touch Gandhi Buri's feet, the answer echoed in her head as clear as a day—NO. A death earned for her motherland was a thousand times better than a life with Shonkar, and she would choose to die a thousand times over for the nation. But when she straightened and met Gandhi Buri's eyes, she had a sudden epiphany.

Binodini knew that she *might* die.

Gandhi Buri knew that she *would* die.

The stealth in her eyes displayed every intention of following Gandhi Baba's words, and her following words cemented her resolve.

"Tomorrow, we shall meet in the village camp and have a meal together. Our last meal together, before the great march."

Binodini's heart skipped a beat. She was not sure if she was ready to say goodbye to Gandhi Buri—her inspiration, her idol, the woman who had taught her the importance of standing up and to live, not just for oneself, but for others. It was she who had shown her the path of Satyagraha, the path that would one

day lead them to an independent India. The path was treacherous and bloody, but it was Gandhi Buri who had imbibed in her — the will to not deter from the path and never give up. So she held her head high and steeled her resolve, albeit teary-eyed, to Do or Die.

"*Ore* Hari! Why don't you have more? Here, have some more rice!" Matangini served the youth, who protested like a stubborn child.

"No, no, Gandhi Buri! I have had enough. You feed me too much. Give some *taler gur pitha* to Narendra, he loves it."

"Here, Narendra...."

"No, no, Gandhi Buri! I am full!"

"*Ore*! How will you people fight if you don't eat well? Amender, Narayan, have some...."

Matangini spent another 15 minutes fussing over the four youth. She had fed them uncountable times in the past, but today, she did not wish to stop. She do not have any children of her own, but these children never made her feel childless. After all, does a woman need to give birth in order to be a mother? She did not feel so.

"The food is delicious Gandhi Buri, even more than usual," Hari said.

"Hmm...perhaps our very last together...," Matangini trailed off.

A silence descended over the camp. After a while, Hari hesitantly broke it, "We might meet again?" But the catch in his voice told that he knew it was not true.

"You shall not cease to fight, children, even after I'm gone," Matangini said, "this land will require a few drops of blood from us to nurture us when we free her from her tormentors.

Then, she looked towards the entrance, hoping for some more of her children to walk in, to have food that she had cooked, but none came. People kept coming in and out throughout the day, but perhaps, these four brave hearts were the last ones she was feeding today.

"Are you waiting for someone, Gandhi Buri?" Amender asked.

"No child," she sighed, "but this is our last meeting. We will not be able to see each other again before the day of the procession. This is our last meal. Bande Mataram!"

"Bande Mataram," the four men repeated, and then departed, leaving her alone for the first time in the day. She was contemplating retiring for the day, when a group of young women peaked in, and she lightened up again.

Binodini entered the camp, where Gandhi Buri was welcoming everyone who was coming to see her for one last meal with her.

Wrapped in a green linen saree, Binodini observed the interactions from afar with downcast eyes. She was hesitant to go and meet Gandhi Buri. She did not wish to say goodbye. The women who had just entered the camp were saying the same thing to Matangini. Binodini strained to hear, "Gandhi Buri, if something were to

happen to me on the 29th..." A girl, who she recognized from the camp was saying.

"Oh death is inevitable, dear, but I do not think yours will come calling for you so soon..."

"Why do you think it is not my time yet, Gandhi Buri?" she asked.

"Well, I believe that whoever is born, is born with a purpose. I just do not believe you have fulfilled yours yet," Gandhi Buri replied with a tell-tale smile.

"I do not understand. What is my purpose?"

"Each human being has to realise their purpose on their own. You will realise yours, dear, when the time is right. Perhaps deep down you know, but you may not have accepted it yet."

Gandhi Buri patted the girl's head, whose jet black hair were gathered at the nape of her neck in a messy bun. The girl was messy and innocent, just like Binodini, but perhaps, Gandhi Buri visualised a hopeful and happy future for her in a free nation with a free soul.

It might take a few more years though, Binodini thought and sighed in silence, and focused on the present, which was not going to last for long. Did Gandhi Buri's words held some meaning for Binodini as well? Did she too, like the other girl inside the tent, was born with a purpose that she hasn't realised yet?

"Do you wish to have some rice, children?" Gandhi Buri was asking the women sitting with her, seeming hopeful. Binodini gave the Lady in White a long look from where she stood hidden from her view, and shed a solitary tear before returning to Sulata's house.

13
CHAPTER

AHIMSA: NON-VIOLENCE

Matangini made her way towards Ajoy's house breathlessly. She had to have her say before the march the next day. She knew he might be busy with the preparations, but she did not have an option. She inhaled deeply to steady her breath before knocking at his door. She could not look weak if she wanted to do this.

The door opened.

"Gandhi Buri! Come inside," Ajoy ushered her in. He crossed the front yard and invited her to have a seat on the porch.

"I got your message, Ajoy Babu," she said in a slightly accusatory tone, but Ajoy did not show any sign of guilt.

"Yes, Gandhi Buri. You should not have come...."

"Who said I was ill? Who told you? I am in perfect health," she cut him off.

"We both know that is not true, Gandhi Buri! Old age is taking over you. That is why I sent you the message. You do not need to participate in the procession tomorrow." Ajoy's voice was warm, yet strict.

Matangini could not bear to be looked as a weak and ailing woman who was too old to carry out her duties, "I will participate tomorrow, Dada Babu! You cannot stop me," she said firmly.

"I am your leader, Gandhi Buri, and it is my responsibility to look after my soldiers. As harsh as I may sound, you are 73 and not in the best of health. I won't even be able to arrange a vehicle for you to reach Tamluk and you won't be able to walk 10-11 kilometres at a stretch. Forgive me, but I cannot permit you to go. I must forbid you..."

"Ajoy, my whole life has been leading up to this moment. I have given my heart and soul for the freedom of this country. I shall not back off now, only because I am no longer as young as you are. Mahatma Gandhi is as old as I am, and yet, he is proudly enduring confinement for his country."

"Gandhi Buri...."

"I will let the others lead. I will only come forward if it is absolutely necessary... if that is what it takes you to, let me go...."

"Let me go." The words echoed and hung in the air between the two great Satyagrahis, and both knew that they carried more than one meaning.

Matangini saw a flitter of emotions run through Ajoy's eyes in a matter of seconds, but he had to come to a decision finally, so he relented.

"Make our country proud, Gandhi Buri. Bande Mataram!"

"Bande Mataram!"

That night, Matangini gathered a group of youngsters and led them to carry out the orders of their leader. Using the blanket of night as a cover, she stood on a lookout as the young men cut down big trees to block the road leading to Tamluk. She could almost hear their hearts beating frantically in unison. The sounds of axes and crickets could hardly muffle the sound of their heartbeats.

"Hurry," she urged, as they felled the trees and moved to digging holes in the roads to block police vans in the morning. She could almost see the police cursing them the next day. While three men dug holes, a young boy of fourteen climbed the telegraph poles to cut off the lines.

Matangini waited for the boy to get the job done and slide down, and patted his back as he did, "That was no trouble at all," the boy shrugged, his nose perking up in air. Even the darkness could not hide his proud expressions.

Matangini chuckled and pulled the boy's ear, "Haughtiness does not suit a Satyagrahi, Lakshmi Narayan. Try humility," and led him and all the young men, back to the village.

The war had begun in earnest.

Shonkar and his colleagues pointed their bayonets at the shaking men. They were poor peasants from the neighbouring villages, sweating off in the fields at gunpoint. It had been hours — morning had turned into night, and yet they hadn't spoken a word.

Shonkar's patience was running out. He was yelling for the umpteenth time now, "Spit it out. Tell us what you know, or we won't hesitate to use these bayonets!" The exhaustion and fear was catching up with the labourers now, their arms sore from mindless digging. Anytime now, one of them will crack. He was sure of it.

All of a sudden, one of the peasants collapsed on the field. One of the red-uniformed sepoys, Mithun, walked up to him and kicked him in the gut, "Wake up! Get back to work."

The peasant did not stir. Mithun signalled to another peasent to check his breathing, "It is really slow, Sahib. We should take him to the...."

"He is not going anywhere!" Mithun bellowed.

"Sahib, he will die," the man pleaded, his fallen hands joined together to plead.

"Trust me, if he doesn't, I will get the job done."

The man broke down into hysterical sobs. Shonkar was disgusted.

"Sahib, I have seen him grow up since he was a little boy. Please, let me...."

"You know what you need to do to take him away," Mithun hissed, "tell me what the Swadesis are up to."

The man bowed his head. The other labourers stopped digging. Some had a hard expression on their faces, determined to keep their mouths shut, while the others were starting to wear off. All of them were looking at the sobbing man to find out what he would do. The night was growing silent. The only sounds that could be

heard were of the crying man and the singing crickets. Even the wind seemed to have slowed down to watch the drama unfold.

"Sahib, we know nothing, please..."

Mithun raised his bayonet in the air, and brought it down in a magnificent motion to stab the...

"No! No! No! Sahib! Mercy! I will tell everything... I will tell everything," the peasant had sprawled over his unconscious friend now, covering his body with his own as a shield.

"The procession, Sahib!" He was even more hysterical now.

"Pathetic," Shonkar thought, but managed to restrain his thoughts to listen to the old peasant, "The procession...there is going to be a procession!"

"What procession?" Mithun yelled again, his bayonet still midway in the air over the man's head, lest the latter change his mind.

"They're going to take over... everything. The government offices, the police stations, everything. It is going to be a big procession." The man rushed over his words, tumbling them over one another so much that it took Shonkar some time to process them. But when he did, he felt his jaw fall open.

Shonkar, Mithun, and the other policemen and soldiers looked at each other, and Mithun's arm finally came slacking down at his side, "We have to inform everyone," he whispered, his tone carrying a wisp of disbelief as he ran out of the field with all of them. The last sight Shonkar caught while following him out was of the pathetic old man gathering the

unconscious peasant in his arms and running towards the village.

Men were arriving from outside the town of Tamluk in great numbers. They were soldiers fully armed with rifles and *lathis*. It hadn't been easy to send them a message, since most of the telegraph and telephone lines had been cut off by the Swadesis. But now, with the onset of a new day, Tamluk was filling up with soldiers and sepoys, like a well-guarded fort. They had to repair the roads with temporary solutions to let their vans come through.

Shonkar along with other policemen and soldiers was deployed on the road heading north out of the town. Stationed near the Ban Pukur lake, initially all of them were ready and alert, silently waiting for the Satyagrahis to make their way towards them. But as the day progressed, and minutes stretched into hours, conversations started to break out around him.

"Do you think they will come?"

"They must have found out information about us."

"Do you think they might change the date of the procession?"

"They might...."

As morning turned into noon, the conversation shifted towards more intellectually stimulating debates.

"Gandhi has urged for non-violent protests, as always," a British soldier named Jonathan commented, as Shonkar strained to make out his accent, "I have always found his strategy effective."

'Effective?' Shonkar thought, 'how can non-violence be effective? The Satyagrahis do not have any weapons. There is no way they can take over the Raj!'

"Well, we have managed to retain control over India for centuries now. So I doubt if it's that effective," another soldier, Thomas, answered.

"No, no, you do not understand, Tom. Gandhi is a clever tactician. He has built an army of Indian soldiers, slowly but surely over the years. He knew if the Indians resorted to violence, we would easily crush them down. We would have valid reasons to retaliate with even powerful weapons. But the moment he convinced Indians to drop their arms and let us maul them with ours, we became the cruel intruders who attack the innocent and unarmed crowd. This is how Gandhi gathered support from all over the country."

"Humph," the sound escaped Shonkar's mouth before he could stop himself.

The two soldiers turned towards him in unison, their red uniforms shining brightly in his eyes.

"You got a problem there, old man?" Jonathan, the taller one asked annoyingly.

Shonkar could feel Mithun freezing beside him, and shared his sentiments. He never wanted any trouble with the British people. No one did.

"No... no... Sahib," he stammered. He felt small and pathetic in front of the two soldiers.

Their eyes said it all. They were staring at him with the same hatred and disgust that he felt for the Swadesis. He averted his eyes with this sudden sense of shame and bowed his head. After a long, torturous minute that felt

like hours, he saw the soldiers' black boots turn away from him, and he released the long breath he had been holding all this time.

Mithun leaned towards him and whispered, "What was that? Why can't you stay silent?"

Shonkar felt his ears turning even hotter than they already were. Keeping his head down, he kept his mouth shut for the rest of the afternoon. As the clock struck two and the shame wore off to be replaced with anger stemming from humiliation, he wanted to lash out someone. 'Weren't these Satyagrahis supposed to have reached by now?' His patience was running out. He knew that someone's blood was going to wash his hands today.

The seconds ticked away, but the soldiers stood guard on empty stomachs throughout. Murmurs were rising about leaving positions.

"It seems futile," someone said, when suddenly, at 3:00 pm, a sepoy from the front lines alerted the entire party.

"They are coming!" He shouted, pointing towards the road going north.

Shonkar's senses perked up. He could see the dust rising from a distance, preceding the advancing procession, welcoming them, towards their death.

As the Swadesis approached near and the dust cleared a little, Shonkar spotted Matangini Hazra, leading the procession, and his blood boiled to a dangerous level.

Their commander, Sj. Anil Kumar Bhattacharjee, signalled for the soldiers to wait, until the Swadesis had reached the narrow entrance by the side of Ban Pukur, and then, he yelled the much awaited order, "Attack!"

14
CHAPTER

DODGING THE BULLETS

On 29th September, Binodini woke up even before the Sun was up. It was still dark outside when she rolled over to peep out of the window. Pulling herself up from the ground, she bent over to roll up the mat she was using as a bed these days. Her eyes fell on Sulata Didi, sleeping peacefully at a distance. She was going to be in for a surprise today; Binodini had woken up before her after all. Ever since running away from Shonkar's house and finding refuge at Sulata's home, she found herself falling back into old habits—waking up late, avoiding chores, sneaking out of the house to run around the village—as if she wasn't married anymore. It was nice to have let down her hair after all these years, but today was different.

Tiptoeing out of the room, she slowly slipped out into the front yard. The cool morning breeze welcomed her on the porch and she could not help but settle down on the spot and have a moment to herself. The last few months had been exciting but stressful too. Every time she attended a meeting of the revolutionaries, or made

rounds around the neighbouring villages to encourage more people to join the movement, she could feel a sinister presence following and shadowing her every minute and every second of her way. It was probably all inside her head, but she sometimes woke up in the middle of the night and found herself imagining that someone was standing outside the window and watching her sleep. She knew that it was just the branch of the mango tree playing tricks with her mind, but she still could not help and turn to Sulata and her mother sleeping at a distance to ensure that they were all safe.

She suspected that it was Shonkar, if not just her imagination. Ever since she had started feeling his presence, her sneaking excursions alone had become less. 'Look at me! Still dancing to my husband's whims,' she would think, more frustrated with herself than with him.

Now, taking a deep breath, she inhaled the morning mist and stared into the horizon, which was beginning to light up with a saffron hue. Had not she known better, she would have thought that it was nothing different than any other day of the year—with a beautiful beginning and a tiring end—but she did know better. Everything they had worked for so long and hard was coming to fruition that day. Her struggle against the British might have been recent, but India had been dealing with their presence for nearly 200 years; they took 100 years to conquer the land and another 100 ruling it. 'But it all ends now,' she thought.

The British might have been successful in ruling the territory, but they have not been successful in conquering their spirits. Gandhi Buri believed that every person who was born on this soil was a Swadesi, a Satyagrahi.

Although some might have chosen the easier path by siding with the British, but they could be won back with love by awakening their inner patriot.

Binodini loved and looked up to Gandhi Buri with respect, but she could not completely agree with her. She had been living with a person who had chosen the easier path for five years, and she could not imagine him to be a patriot, no matter how deep one searched, or how loud one called out. Nevertheless, she tried hard to be a better person and to see good in everyone, no matter how difficult it seemed.

She sighed and saw the Sun come out of hiding in a slow and unhurried fashion, as if the Sun was unaware of the day it had brought with itself. By the time the birds started to sing, she could hear a commotion from inside the hut. She assumed that Sulata and her mother were up, probably going about their morning business. But the door burst open and Sulata came hurrying out in panic, "Binodini! What are you doing here?"

"Relaxing," Binodini shrugged.

"Maa! She is out here. Everything is fine," Sulata yelled at the door, and settled down next to Binodini, "You scared us. You never wake up before us. Are you alright?"

"Yes, Didi," Binodini said, giving her a reassuring smile, but the older girl still looked worried.

"Are you scared, Binodini? Because I think I am."

"I think I would be lying if I said I am not, Didi. But that would not stop me from participating...."

"Nor would it stop me!" Sulata said hurriedly, lest Binodini assumed otherwise, "It's just that...my Abhijoy... he... he died fighting them, Binodini. It left me, his Baba,

his Maa, everyone devastated. It has been two years. His mother can't seem to string a single sentence without choking up. And his Baba—whom I never saw with a bowed head—can't walk without slouched shoulders anymore. Every time I visit them, my white saree reminds them of the loss of their only son. They have never accused me, don't get me wrong, but I can still see the pain that I cause them with my presence, so I refrain from making any visits. I wonder, what would become of my mother if something were to happen to me, her only daughter..."

Binodini stared at Sulata, while the latter stared into the horizon with a faraway look. Often careless with her tongue, she did not know what to say today, so she chose to say truth, "To be honest, Didi, I cannot relate with the kind of fear that you are feeling. I doubt if anyone in my family would spare a tear if something happens to me. My parents do not wish to do anything with me and my husband. Well, he coped with the loss of his first wife, so I doubt if he would find any trouble finding someone for a third time. Although, for the sake of the poor girl, I wish he never finds her," she chuckled, "But...."

Sulata gave her a funny look, "You find humour in the strangest of things, Binodini."

"Why don't you remarry?" the words left Binodini's mouth before she could stop them, and Sulata gasped. "I do not mean to pry, but your mother wants you to...."

"How can I?" Sulata cut her off, I can't insult Abhijoy's memories...."

"But wouldn't he want you to be happy?"

"Binodini... you know nothing about love, do you? Perhaps, someday you will understand love and me."

Binodini laughed louder this time, "I am married to someone I will never love...."

"Yes, that is the problem."

Binodini knew where the conversation was going, and just the thought of the possibility Sulata was hinting at, filled her with anxiety and fear. She sprang up to her feet in panic and turned towards the door, "We should get ready, Didi. This conversation might turn out to be meaningless at the end of the day." Binodini went inside, leaving Sulata with a sad smile on her face.

The morning mist soon gave way to a humid afternoon. Although the September Sun was merciful, Binodini could not ignore the direct light of noon.

"I know what you are doing," Bipin's voice made her look up, as she shaded her face with her palm.

"What?"

"You are distracting yourself by complaining about the heat, so you don't have to think about the procession."

"Since when did you become so insightful?"

"That is hurtful, Bini!" He feigned a painful expression and she chuckled.

"What are you people talking about?"

Binodini turned to acknowledge Lakshmi Narayan thus, a gangling boy who was the same age as her. She smiled up at him, "Nothing, Bipin is scared, that's all."

Lakshmi Narayan gasped, "Dada? Scared?"

"She's lying, Lakshmi," Bipin was not amused.

Binodini looked from one boy to another. Bipin was a couple of years older than them. He was also a couple of inches taller than Lakshmi, and towered over Binodini. Subtly, she propped herself on her toes, for her height had always been a sore topic for her but nothing surpassed Bipin's eyes. He opened his mouth to make a comment, but thankfully, they heard the loud and magnificent blowing of a conch shell just then.

Gandhi Buri had given the signal. It was time to move. Binodini looked around and her little distractions faded away in the background. The Sun, her height, everything had been an illusion she had created for herself. The overwhelming crowd of 6000 revolutionaries she was surrounded by, was the reality of the present. Bipin and Lakshmi Narayan's voices were drowned out, and the excited voices of the revolutionaries started to fade. The sound of the conch flooded the atmosphere and charged the hearts and souls of everyone present. Binodini could feel her heartbeat picking up speed, when suddenly Sulata came over to her and grabbed her hand.

"I am with you, Binodini," she whispered, and in her eyes, Binodini could see a blinding light of steely resolve. Logic dictated that it was the reflection of sun rays, but logic was not what she was looking for at the moment. It was courage, courage to fight the British Raj and say goodbye to some of her loved ones forever.

She nodded and turned her eyes towards Gandhi Buri, who had now taken her first step on the road to Tamluk. The symbol of the national movement soared high in her hands. The bright saffron, white and green of the flag seemed to chant the demands of Swaraj with them, and the *charkha* in the centre was spinning

to weave a free future for this Holy Land. Binodini was filled with anticipation and pride for all these people who were walking in step with each other to write a new history today.

Gandhi Buri was chanting "Bande Mataram" as they proceeded, and the rest of them were echoing after her. The last she had heard, Ajoy Dada had not been in favour of her heading the procession, but now as she walked with her head held high before everyone else, Binodini wasn't surprised that she must have convinced Dada to give her the lead. She saw Lakshmi Narayan and another boy of fourteen, Purimadhab, walk just a step behind Gandhi Buri. Revolutionaries Nagendra Nath Samanta and Jiban Chandra Bera were also up in the front. Behind all of them, were thousands of other revolutionaries, most of whom were—to Binodini's utter joy and pride—women like her.

As they neared the town, she could imagine the British soldiers finding themselves surrounded, for theirs was not the only procession that was heading towards Tamluk today; there were four more processions approaching from separate directions to take over what was rightfully theirs. But when they reached the narrow entrance of the town by the side of Ban Pukur, they spotted the line of armed soldiers and policemen waiting for the unarmed revolutionaries like a ferocious pack of wolves.

'They knew!' She thought, but before she could articulate her thoughts into proper words for Sulata, the soldiers launched a deadly attack.

The air was suddenly echoing with the deafening sounds of bullets, and it drowned the sudden yelps of

the Swadesis, who had to withdraw some distance in a panicked sprint. The bullets stopped, and a haunting silence followed. For a while, the men in red and khaki uniforms and the procession led by the Lady in White stared at each other from a safe distance in a standoff. Each of them had only one thought in their minds, 'What next?'

Seconds stretched into eternity, and then suddenly, before anyone could think or plan their next move, someone broke out of the revolutionaries' end and charged the soldiers. With a shocked yelp, Binodini realised a little too late that it was none other than Lakshmi Narayan. He had run straight into the soldiers' rank and had seized a gun out of one's hand, taking advantage of the element of surprise. But that element did him no good before the soldiers who outnumbered him. For a second or two, he fiddled with the gun, which was perhaps too heavy for him, but before he could figure out what to do with it, the soldiers surrounded him like a pack of hyenas and started beating him black and blue.

It was then that Gandhi Buri raised her conch and called out, "Bande Mataram!" indicating the Swadesis to move forward once again.

When the troops saw the revolutionaries advancing, they forgot about Lakshmi Narayan, who managed to run back to the procession. Binodini took a moment to thank Devi Maa for his safety, but the moment was short-lived. The troop had now opened fire. Once again, the crack of bullets created shock waves around them. But this time, no one withdrew.

Binodini reached out to Sulata, and hand in hand, the girls followed Gandhi Buri's lead, walking towards the bullets instead of walking away from them. Gandhi Buri had the freedom flag held high up in her hands and she was saying something to the Indian troops amongst the British ones, "Brothers, you are our fellow *Bhartiyas*. You still have time. Quit the government jobs and join us. Make our country proud!"

But the firing did not stop. At some point, Sulata's hand slipped out of Binodini's, but in the chaos, Binodini could not follow where she had vanished. One stray bullet suddenly whizzed past her arm and as she swirled around to face the direction it had come from, she caught its owner's eyes. Clad in the very khaki uniform that she had spent so many mornings ironing, he was staring at her with fire in his eyes, warning her to stop. But with a racing heart and steel in her resolve, she kept walking towards the bullets instead.

Suddenly, a movement caught her peripheral vision. She turned, a little left to find Gandhi Buri's left hand struck by a bullet. The conch shell that had served as her trumpet to kick start the procession, had fallen down and broken into pieces. Binodini and several other women rushed towards their leader, but the soldiers fired again, this time hitting Gandhi Buri's other hand, which was carrying the flag. The women heard Gandhi Buri's cry of pain, even her hand sagged a little; but only momentarily. She did not let the flag touch the ground, and advanced again, once again requesting the soldiers to stop firing.

"Do not fire," she said, "this is a non-violent movement. Join us. Bande Mataram!" but before she

could say anything further, a soldier's bullet found its mark right in the middle of her forehead, and burst out of the back of her skull. The women screamed, dodging bullets simultaneously, as they tried to reach Gandhi Buri. Binodini, however, was too stunned to care about the bullets anymore. She was rooted to her spot as she saw Gandhi Buri now a lifeless body, walk three more steps before crumbling down to the ground. It was the end of an era.

15
CHAPTER

THE SANCTIFIED SOIL

For what seemed like a long time, everything was still. Even the bullets had stopped. Gandhi Buri had fallen dead, and her Swadesi blood was sanctifying the soil that she lay on. The freedom flag, however, had not touched the ground. Even in her death, the Lady in White, did not let it fall. Binodini was numb with shock, but when she saw a soldier running towards Gandhi Buri and kicking the flag to the ground, she sprang back to life. She ran towards Gandhi Buri and grabbed the mast, but she was not alone. The lowly act of the soldier had induced a similar reaction in other women who were nearby. They nodded at each other and pulled the flag up again, letting it flutter free as it was supposed to. The soldiers glared at them. But they did not dare shoot again as they knew that by gunning down their leader, they had initiated an irrevocable wave of revolution in Tamluk.

An older woman nodded at Binodini and the rest of the women, and they let go of the mast to let her carry it all alone. Binodini turned back, not brave enough

to look down at Gandhi Buri yet, but brave enough to assess the rest of the situation, or so she thought. The scene in front of her eyes left her terrified!

A few feet behind the martyred leader, lay the gunned down bodies of Lakshmi Narayan and Purimadhab, the boys with whom she had spent several days in revolutionary camps – strategizing, planning, following Gandhi Buri's instructions – and laughing, jesting, even finding little moments to smile in the anticipatory air of distress. Tearing her gaze away from the boys' dead frames, her eyes landed on the bodies of Nagendra Nath Samanta and Jiban Chandra Bera, men who had been flanking Gandhi Buri till their very last breath. She bowed her head in respect for the martyred souls and then collected herself to get back to work. So many people had been wounded, and her job for now was to get them first aid. But before she could reach even one of them, someone grabbed her upper arm and jolted her back.

Even before her eyes had captured the offender, she knew who it was, "Shonkar!"

"Oh! So now you are not even pretending to respect me? Uttering your husband's name! Have you no shame!"

"I am not the one who should be ashamed," Binodini retorted. She had no fear left now. She had seen death closely today, and she was no longer afraid.

"Go home, Binodini! Or else..."

Binodini pried her arm out of Shonkar's grip, leaving him red-eyed and shaking. "No," she spat out and walked away.

That was it; it was just a simple word, and it had taken her five years to say it. But it was not the right moment to savour her victory. She had an incomplete task to finish. Gandhi Buri has not sacrificed her life for nothing!

She had to find Sulata and Bipin!

Just then, a whimpering voice caught her attention to her left, and it was not alone. There were several such voices coming from every direction. She saw a woman struggling to lift a teenage boy whom she recognised was from camp. He was shot in his left shoulder and even his ankle was sprained. Binodini rushed to them, and together, the two women helped the boy to reach a nearby government hospital. Even there, the scene was not very pleasant. The place was flooded with wounded, dying revolutionaries. She spotted familiar faces, and after helping the boy sit down on an empty chair, she ran to-and-fro from one corner to another to assist them. Dodging the soldiers in red, who were trying to prevent them from tending to the wounded, she kept going. She fetched water, towels, bandages, scissors, whatever she was asked for.

Suddenly, a soldier's booming voice halted the entire commotion, "Stop, or I will shoot you," he was yelling at a woman, who was attending to a wounded man crying for water. Having dipped the tail of her saree in the nearby water tank, she was trying to get the water to the man, for there weren't any glasses left.

The gun was aimed at her, and yet she was fearless. "You may kill me, but I am not going to yield to your threat."

The stunned soldier could not help but lower the weapon, and as he did, everyone present there let out a collective breath, and resumed their activities. The soldiers were now being blatantly ignored. They looked confused and helpless, as typically, it should have been the wounded revolutionaries begging for mercy, but that was not the case anymore. They were injured and their leader had been martyred, but their spirits were more alive than ever. They would strike back!

Binodini finally spotted Sulata after an hour from the opposite corner of the hospital ward. Her white saree was sullied in blood. Navigating through the flood of revolutionaries, Binodini made her way towards her, trying to convince herself that the blood might be someone else's. And she was right! Lying on a bed next to Sulata—crunched up amongst three more wounded men—was Bipin! Unconscious!

"Bipin!"

"He was shot in his left leg; he was trying to save me," Sulata stated, staring at Bipin's limp figure without blinking. She was shocked. It took a good amount of shaking to get her back into her senses. Binodini saw the bleeding leg of Bipin and ran to get a doctor. It took her another forty minutes to get the overworked doctor to tend to Bipin. But the wound had festered and turned infectious, and by that evening, Bipin was left with a high fever, a shaking body, and an amputated leg.

The hospital staff could not tackle the incoming crowd of revolutionaries anymore, and the ones who

had been tended to were ousted. The injured comrades, along with Bipin had to be shifted to the revolutionary camps. At the Alinan camp, Binodini and Sulata took turns throughout the night tending to Bipin. They tore the ends of their sarees where they were still spotless, dipped them into water and placed them on his forehead. Slowly, the fever came under control over night, and the news started flooding in.

All the five processions had faced casualties. The soldiers had fired at all of them indiscriminately. Stories of brave-hearts were exchanged to fuel the solemn fire of revolution.

"The procession that I was part of had approached from the west. We had about eight thousand revolutionaries in our group," a middle-aged woman was narrating, "as we neared the police station, the sepoys rained *lathis* on us. When we refused to back down, the officer in charge ordered to open fire. Five of our comrades fell down on the spot. The rest of us had to disperse. A few of us ran to the *thana* instead, but we were fired at even there. One of our brothers was hit and was martyred. As the rest of us focused on getting the wounded out of the building, and to the Ramakrishna Sevashram, the heartless soldiers snatched away Ram Chandra Bera from us. He was dragged across the road by his legs, his body writhing in pain and bloodied. They abandoned him unconscious outside the *thana*. We thought that he was dead, so we had to withdraw and get the living ones to safety. After we left, a fellow Swadesi who had been there told us about the ensuing events.

Ram Chandra regained consciousness after a while, and like the true patriot that he was, he instantly forgot

that he had been injured. He reached the outer door of the *thana* by dragging his bloodied self there, and cried in joy, for he thought he had attained victory, "Here I am!" he had shouted, "The *thana* is captured!" And sisters, after uttering these words, which perhaps he knew were his last, he slumped down and attained martyrdom."

A respectful silence descended over the camp. Not a single pair of eyes were dry. Their hearts were heavy with sorrow as well as pride.

"We lost our Gandhi Buri too," a weak but clear voice startled Binodini and Sulata.

"Bipin! You are awake!" The girls cried out simultaneously, but with different emotions. Binodini's face had lit up in the dark, and Sulata had burst into tears.

"I thought you would die, Bipin! Because of me!"

"Do not cry, Didi," Bipin consoled her. His voice was as soft and thin as paper. He tried to sit, "I would have preferred to lay down my life like Gandhi Buri, rather than run away from the bullets." He groaned and fell back on the sheets. His eyes were wet, but Binodini knew that it wasn't the physical pain that was bothering him.

"She walked right into the bullets!" He said, "She kept chanting *Bande Mataram* and kept striding forward fearlessly. Two bullet wounds on each of her hands could not stop her. She kept marching on. Even when the final bullet found its mark through her forehead, even as the blood trickled down her killing wound, she kept marching on! While clutching the tricolour high up in the air, she chanted *Bande Mataram* and marched three

more steps after being shot, before finally falling down. She didn't let the *tiranga* touch the dust below.... The soldiers had to kick it down...," Bipin choked up and stopped.

Binodini could not take it any more and broke down. Throughout the day, and all through the night, she had kept her calm, trying to maintain her composure for the sake of Bipin, Sulata, and the numerous injured Swadesis who needed her assistance. But she could pretend no more. She knew that with the advent of a new day in a couple of hours, they would have to move on and carry on the revolution. For the motherland, for Gandhi Baba, for people like Ram Chandra, Gandhi Buri...

But the new day had not yet begun. The soldiers had left them alone, and the darkness of the night was their only companion. But it brought silence with it, and silence brought back emotions. They had lost their leader, their Gandhi Buri, and it was only now that the fact was completely hitting Binodini. She now had the time to feel the loss, and the void created by it. She had time to process the pain.

She had lost her mentor, her home away from home. She had lost a friend who had made fun of her small height when she had first met her five years ago. She had lost a mother who had fed her when she had felt abandoned by her own mother. The images of her bloodied body came back to her all of a sudden, and tears started pouring down her eyes with even more intensity. Sulata broke down again and wrapped her arms around Binodini.

Another revolutionary, Hari, who was tending to his injured friend, Amender, nearby, joined the

mourning—perhaps remembering the several occasions when Gandhi Buri had scolded and fed him like a child—and the air turned melancholic with their sobbing. Each one of them had lost their mother today. Gandhi Buri's death was a personal loss for each one of them, and none of them would ever be the same again.

16
CHAPTER

THE CHAOTIC AFTERMATH

People kept coming in and out of the camp. Many brought news, while others were relatives, friends and well-wishers of the wounded Swadesis resting inside. Initially, the news-bearers only brought depressing tales of police firing and brutality, but when someone came in and announced that the *Vidyut Bahini* had attained victory over the Sutahata *thana*, it significantly boosted everyone's morale. The bravery of *Bhagini Sena Sibir* was also reiterated over and over.

"They came from the east and west, and you would not believe it, they arrested the police commander himself! The police officials had no chance! They were left helpless when the *Vidyut Bahini* took away their weapons, and set the *thana* ablaze. But mind you, the Swadesis did not treat the captured soldiers in an ill manner. In fact, they arranged their return to homes safely!

"It was a walk of shame, if you ask me, especially after the government had sent aeroplanes to drop bombs on the Swadesis."

A collective gasp ran around the camp every time someone mentioned the bomb, and when the narrator assured them that it had fallen into a tank and had done no harm, a collective sigh replaced the shock. It was as if they feared that every new narrator who told the tale would somehow change the story, or that someone would tell them that the bomb had in fact caused destruction. Only after the 13th narrator of the day confirmed that the bomb had done no harm, did the Swadesis seem completely convinced.

But the relief did not last long. For the next many days, Binodini and Sulata were on the look out. The aftermath of the processions brought in hundreds of soldiers to Midnapore. Every time one of them went out to procure food and other supplies, they spotted a new military camp on the outskirts of the village, and each time they returned to the Swadesi camp safely, they brought in a new tale of oppression.

"They raided the neighbouring village today. I heard they burned several villages and looted others. Women, children, old people... They are sparing no one..."

"Do you think we should shift Bipin out of here?"

The girls would look down at the sleeping figure of the person in question, while the question itself would hang between them unanswered for a long time. When they heard that the Congress was preparing to set up an independent government in the villages, they thought that they would not need to move out of the camp. But one morning, when Bipin was still asleep, the girls heard a commotion outside. A few other people who were awake by then tensed. A deadly silence descended upon the camp.

Binodini sprang into action and pulled the sheet and covered Bipin's face, hiding him from the view. She had barely finished, when heavily armed men in red and khaki uniforms broke in. Binodini and Sulata flanked the mat Bipin was lying on, trying to look unsuspicious and innocent. But the raiders were indiscriminate while pulling the Swadesis out and beating them black and blue.

"Sulata Didi!" Binodini shrieked as one of the soldiers grabbed Sulata's hair and pushed her down on the ground. She rushed to stand as a shield between the fallen girl and the soldier's bayonet. Until that moment, Binodini was considerably calm. But her composure broke when a khaki-clad constable who had found Bipin, shouted, and his words filled her with terror.

"Hey! Shonkar, come in here! Isn't this one your brother-in-law or something?"

'This man!' Binodini thought as she saw him enter her view, 'Devi Maa, when is he going to leave me alone?'

She helped Sulata to her feet, and as the two girls steadied each other, Binodini registered the blanched face of her husband. He was visibly panicking, his neck snapping from Binodini to Bipin and back, over and over again.

Bipin was now awake. Binodini saw the exact moment his eyes registered the chaos inside the camp, and then his brother-in-law's presence. He grabbed the stick he was using as a makeshift crutch for himself and struggled to pull himself up. Shonkar paled even further at the sight of his amputated limb.

"Dada," Bipin muttered, but Shonkar quickly cut him off.

"No, Chondra Deb. You are mistaken. I don't know this boy."

Constable Chondra Deb looked doubtful, but he did not counter his colleague, "Very well, Shonkar. If you say so."

The two constables resumed their job. Chondra Deb grabbed Bipin's arm and pulled him towards the exit. The girls rushed after them. They were the last ones to be thrown out of the tent, and as soon as they moved out, it was set on fire by one of the policemen. Chondra Deb was still standing beside Bipin, "You are Bipin, are you not? I remember you from the time you dropped by over the *thana* to see Shonkar. You were on your way to Calcutta, I suppose?"

Bipin looked over at Binodini, but all she could do was shrug. She could not decide what the possible implications of Bipin's confirmation could be. Would they be spared because they were Shonkar's family? Or would Shonkar struggle at work because they were his family?

Nevertheless, Bipin chose to stay silent, but Chondra Deb had got his answer, "You are a good kid. Go home. You have already lost enough for the choices you have made." He nodded towards his limb.

"And I do not regret any of them, Dada," Bipin replied without hesitance. Chondra Deb gave him a long look, perhaps trying to form a decision about what to do with him. Finally, he walked away along with the soldiers he had come with, leaving the Swadesis staring glumly at their burning camp.

After more than two weeks of the procession, Binodini and Bipin followed Sulata to her mother's house amidst a heavy storm, only to find the house shut. Sulata inquired at a neighbour's house, "Sandhya Kaki, have you seen my mother?"

"Your Maa received communication from Anantpur a couple of days ago. Your Pisi Maa's house was burned down by the British soldiers. She needed your Maa's help."

Sulata gasped, seeming to have lost the ability to form words.

"Do not worry," Sandhya Kaki tried to console her, "No one was hurt, as far as I know."

That calmed Sulata a little. Binodini held the older girl's hand and led her back to her house next door. After they managed to open the makeshift lock, they settled down on the cold hut floor.

"Isn't it strange, such a heavy storm in October..." Bipin started, but stopped midway when he realised that no one was paying attention.

Binodini was wondering if she should say something to Sulata but the latter spoke before her, "It is strange how tragedies bring people closer; they make them appreciate and support each other like they would have never done otherwise. I remember when my Baba was still alive, and Pisi Maa was an unmarried young woman–only seven years older than me—Maa did not like her one bit. She used to be after Baba's life to marry her off. She was very happy when Baba finally found a match for her. Perhaps, even happier than when her own daughter found a groom. But when Baba passed away, and Pisi Maa was grieving for her father-like elder brother, it

was Maa who held her in her arms and comforted her like her own child. And even now, when her family is going through such hard times..."

"It seems terrible," Bipin suddenly said.

"Yes, Bipin. It is terrible. The British Raj has been cruel..."

"No! Sulata Didi. It seems terrible out there. This storm does not look normal!"

"Yes, it does seem abnormal. Do you think the house would be able to take it?" She asked, concerned over the thrashing windows and the shaking walls of the hut.

"I hope so," Binodini said, not knowing these to be her last words before the house fell apart. It was quick, As the bolt of the main door broke down, it did not take long for the walls to blow away. Within minutes, the entire village was flooded with a huge tidal wave from the sea. Not finding any other alternative, Sulata, Binodini and Bipin ran outside and found themselves at the mercy of a terrible cyclone. The only refuge they could find was the mango tree in the front yard. It took a collective effort to get Bipin up on one of the medium-heighted branches, before the girls quickly climbed up on the higher ones.

Binodini was numb. Hugging the tree trunk with all her might, she was unable to understand why everything was falling apart one after the other in quick succession. Perhaps this was the kind of sacrifice their leaders kept talking about, what Gandhi Buri used to talk about before she...

Even the thought of her name brought back torturous images in her mind. And now that she came to think about it, this havoc raised by a natural disaster was a

lot less traumatic, even though it lasted for hours and days at end.

From the mango tree, Binodini could see all kinds of things and life forms being washed away by the disastrous waters; houses, livestock, trees and even humans. But she could do absolutely nothing until it was safe and still for them to climb down. When the cyclone died down, the remnants of devastation it had left behind made Binodini choke up. Sulata's mother's house, which had given shelter to Binodini for months was now a mess of mud and washed away debris. The *pakka* porch she had spent days sitting and pondering upon was partially destroyed. The village which had been so kind to her was soaked up in debris and grief. The kind lady next door, who had assured Sulata of her mother's well being just days ago, among many others in this kind and revolutionary village, were no more alive in their mortal forms.

Midnapore was drowned in sorrow, and the British could not care less. After the procession, their humanity seemed to have died down. It was obvious that gunning down the revolutionaries, raiding the houses of innocent villagers, burning down villages and torturing people with irrational arrests had not been enough for them. So now they even refused to provide any relief to the cyclon-hit district. People were being punished for wanting to live a free and dignified life, and they knew that they were on their own to rebuild their villages while mourning their dead in silence. While Sulata immediately left for Anantpur to assure herself of her mother and Pisi Maa's safety, Binodini and Bipin joined the volunteers in the relief work. All revolutionary activities had been

stopped, and the only focus was to provide first aid, food and medicine to the most affected. Since Bipin could not walk for long stretches of time, they decided to stay at relief camps and help out whoever came in.

Then, one day, as Bipin was sitting over the help desk to attend to the needy, they had the most unexpected visitor. Binodini had been boiling some water for a child when she heard that familiar but unwelcome voice, and she knew that the woman was no relief-seeker.

"Chhotu Dada, I have come to take you home," Suchitra had finally found her *Debor* and *Boudi.*

17
CHAPTER

KORMO: THE GOOD OR BAD ACTIONS

Bipin motioned for Bini to stay in the camp and he followed his Boudi at her request. While giving Bini a reassuring look, he thought that he saw concern in her eyes. It is difficult to tell these days. She had completely shut herself off after the procession. Even while tending to his good-for-nothing limb and then later to the cyclone-affected villagers, she worked mechanically, as if it was something she just had to do. When she broke down after Gandhi Buri's martyrdom, it was the last sign of any emotions that Bipin observed in her. He contemplated many times to talk to her about her detachment but she always anticipated his intention through his expertly maneuvered conversation about some urgent matter or the other. There were plenty of them these days anyway. The worst thing was that Bipin felt utterly useless, even though he was extremely worried about her. He felt incapable of supporting her emotionally, and perhaps that was why he felt her pulling away from him. Nevertheless, he followed his Boudi out of the tent and found a severed trunk of a nearby tree to offer her as a chair.

"I am alright standing, Chhotu Dada. I do not wish to sit, anyway," Suchitra said, her voice suspiciously dripping in honey.

"Why are you here, Boudi?" He asked, sounding a little harsher than he had intended.

"I told you, I have come to take you home! Hear me out before you protest..." she added hastily when she saw Bipin open his mouth to interrupt, and he fell silent.

"My Pati Babu, your Dada, keeps writing to me, asking about your well-being, because his letters at your school keep going unanswered. What am I supposed to tell him? How am I to face him when he returns?" She was close to tears now.

"Is that all that concerns you, Boudi? I doubt you have any worries about my well-being. The only thing that you are worried about is your position in my Dada's life if he finds out that I am not doing well..."

"That is absolutely untrue, Chhotu Dada! I am offended that you would even think so. Your Dada had entrusted you to me, but that was not the only reason I took care of you. You have become like the son I never had..."

"I do not believe you," Bipin stated as a matter of fact. Suchitra looked puzzled. Her worry lines were deepening. She was trying to find a way to make him believe her, when all of a sudden, she spotted someone peeping out of the relief camp. Bipin turned to find Bini observing them from a distance. When he turned back to Suchitra, he found her completely transformed. Her polite facade had broken down, replaced by an ugly expression of hate.

"She has poisoned your mind against me, hasn't she? Against me, my Dada, against your family? I had suspected her of luring you to this wretched side of the Swadesis, but I did not think her capable of such vileness." She yelled in Bini's direction, "You have ruined our family! I had correctly recognised your arrival with *kharapa lokshana*, the bad sign in our house! Do you remember her crying during the *shubho drishti*, Chhotu Dada? She never..."

"Enough, Boudi!" Bipin was livid, "Have you no control over your hurtful words?"

"You are ordering me into silence, Chhotu Dada? What *kaala jaadu*, black magic, has this witch done..."

"Boudi, please! You are crossing your line!" Bipin was vaguely aware of Bini's presence by his side now, "Have these many months of solitude and despair taught you nothing?"

"What else am I supposed to make out of this?" Suchitra was signalling to the two of them with her hands, "Why are you here together? She is a married woman..."

"She is a Swadesi, a Satyagrahi, a social worker who cares about this land and her people. And so do I. Unlike you and your Dada, who did not even have the guts to recognise us as his family in front of his colleagues! Don't look so surprised. You heard right!"

Suchitra seemed stumped for a second before reviving, "He would have lost his job, Chhotu Dada. I am sure he had no intention of insulting you so..."

Bipin did not see any point in this conversation. It was going nowhere, so he decided to end it, "I am not

returning to your Dada's house, Boudi. It is not mine to be called."

Bipin could see that Suchitra was truly panicking now. She looked from Bipin to Bini and then back again, "What if she comes along as well?" She made a final attempt to convince him.

"Why, Nonod ji, do you wish to let in a witch back into your home?" Bini was quick to take a jibe at Suchitra's offer, and Bipin was pleasantly surprised to hear the hint of her old self in her words, the one who did not know how to control her tongue. He smiled inwardly and thought that whatever happened, it happened for the good. He saw Suchitra swallow the bitter taste of defeat, and motioned for her cart-driver to take her back to her Dada's house.

Binodini glanced at Bipin's sleeping face resting across her in the bullock cart. She had not seen him at peace for ages. Even though it would take them less than an hour on the partially built new roads to reach their destination, he started snoring even before the driver had nudged the reins to start the bullocks. Binodini related with Bipin, for after long last, the British government's apathy had prompted Congress workers to take control in their own hands. As the eventful year of 1942 came to an end, Congress established Tamralipta Jatiya Sarkar, a parallel government to the British one. Satish Samanta Babu was appointed as the *sarbadhinayak* of the Sarkar, and since the new year was arriving with such a bundle of hope, the Swadesis were bound to allow themselves

a little peace and calm. So, Bipin and Binodini had decided to go home at last, not for Shonkar or Suchitra, but for Bhaskor Dada, Bipin's elder brother who was in Tamluk after years.

Binodini never had a proper conversation with Bhaskor Dada. She had only seen him twice or thrice. The first time was at her wedding, but she did not even know who he was then. She had been under the impression that he was her groom's elder brother. It was funny, how she had assumed that it was Bipin to whom she was getting married. She smiled at the memory. It was the only thing she could find to smile at when she thought about that day.

'Would it have been so bad?' She thought, 'What if I had married Bipin indeed and not Shonkar?' Perhaps, life would have been much better. Perhaps then, she would have experienced what a good marriage was supposed to be like–just like the one Sulata claimed that she once had. Perhaps, she would have even got a chance to visit Calcutta. Maybe to live there for a while?

Suddenly, the cart hit a small bump and she jumped back into her senses. 'What am I thinking!' She chided herself. She knew that Bipin and she were close, but the possibility of him as her husband was odd. She did not see him in that light. Anyway, why whine over a scenario which was not true, and would never come true? She was Shonkar's wife! That was the truth. She may have been acting as a rebel for her nation, but after all of this got over, she would have to return to him ultimately. Where else was she supposed to go? The ties with her mother's house had long been severed. She could not forever remain a burden on Sulata's mother, now should

she? In Sulata's absence, Bipin and Binodini had helped rebuild the house, something which they imagined would bring a smile to the mother and daughter's faces when they returned, but that did not mean that Binodini had any claim over the establishment. In fact, it was the least that she could have done.

'Perhaps, even living alone in a separate establishment of my own would not be so bad,' the thought suddenly struck her, but she did not know how she was supposed to survive in that scenario. 'Maybe like Gandhi Buri!' The thought popped in her head without a warning and she sighed. It was better to shut her brain off and focus on the road she was travelling on. She wasn't happy when she was on her way to her husband's house as a newlywed, nor was she now! She knew what was coming and it was merely 10 minutes away.

As the cart pulled up in front of Shonkar's house, the first thing she noticed was that the cyclone had not done much damage to it. The newly built neighbouring *kutcha* houses, were indicating the death of their older counterparts, but Shonkar's *pakka* house stood tall.

"Seems unfair, doesn't it? After witnessing innocent people suffering due to the disaster?" Bipin's voice startled Binodini. She hadn't realised that he had woken up.

"Yes," she answered. "Nevertheless, *kormo* will catch up someday."

"Are you laying down a curse on your beloved husband, Bini?" Bipin smirked, carefully climbing down from the cart.

"No, I am just saying that no one can escape the fruits of their deeds. That is the law of nature."

"It is good to see you hopeful again," Bipin said, serious this time.

"We are all hopeful now, aren't we?" She smiled at him.

"Bipin!" A husky voice called out from the door. Bhaskor Dada was a man of an unusually large build. With his beak-like nose and large flailing arms, Binodini had always thought that he resembled a mighty bird. He was flying out of Shonkar's house towards his younger brother, and in a few quick strides, he had taken him in a tight embrace. Binodini felt like an intruder while witnessing such a tender moment. She fidgeted with the tail of her saree while waiting for the brothers to pull out of their embrace. When Bhaskor Dada finally did, his eyes were sparkling with unshed tears.

"What did they do to you! Oh Durga! Oh Durga! What did they do to you!"

"Dada! Dada, I am alright..."

"They took away your good foot! That was the one you used to kick football with! I always thought you used the wrong foot, but Maa Durga knows I regret it. I shouldn't have said it, Bipin! I shouldn't have..."

Bhaskor Dada broke down into uncontrollable tears. Binodini's eyes welled up as she saw Bipin's dry ones. He was trying to be strong for his brother. She knew he did not want anyone to pity him, so she brushed away her tears immediately.

"Dada, I am fine! Let us go inside," Bipin tried to console his brother, but the neighbours had started gathering now. Soon, the questions started pouring in.

"How did it happen?"

"Did it hurt?"

"Did you see who shot you?"

"Couldn't have been Shonkar, could it? I heard he was there!"

All eyes turned toward the entrance of the house, where Shonkar and Suchitra were standing, watching the drama unfold.

'I won't be too surprised if it turns out to be true,' Binodini thought, her mouth bitter with contempt. She could see that her husband was bothered by the questioning silence of the neighbours. She truly expected him to snap at all of them and say something offending as usual, but he surprised her with his calmness when he answered, "Of course, it wasn't me. I value my job, but I value my family more!"

Binodini wanted to laugh out loud at the audacity of such a claim, but the neighbours were already doing it. A collective sarcastic laughter filled the air around them, when a woman named Kamla who lived two houses down, spoke, "That's why you did not allow Binodini back into your house when she chose the path of Satyagraha, because you value family?"

Shonkar was stumped, and so was Binodini, but the reason was entirely different. She had always known Kamla to be a meek and soft-spoken woman who avoided conflicts. She had always been too nice to refuse Binodini from dropping at her house uninvited and listening to the radio broadcast. She found herself smiling as she realised that she treasured those fond memories—those quiet afternoons at Kamla's house when her land-owning, wealthy husband was gone away for hours. Perhaps, Kamla considered her a friend.

"Why don't you answer, *hawaldar*?" Pundit Tarapada, the temple priest, asked.

Shonkar was cornered, but Binodini found herself grudgingly admiring his courage as he stood his ground without flinching, "I never forbade my wife from returning home, Kaka! She is my *Griha Lakshmi*, after all. But our paths are different. I would not claim that I agree with her choices, but who am I to stop her..."

"Oh, cut this nonsense, *hawaldar*! We knows what a wife-respecting fellow you are. We all know poor Ashalata's fate. May her soul find peace!"

Binodini was taken aback. This conversation had taken an unexpected turn. Just minutes ago, she had been wondering if society would ever accept her if she chose to abandon her marital life, and now, the same society was standing up for her against her husband!

"I do not understand why you felt the need to drag my dead wife into this conver..."

"We do not want to hear your nonsense, *hawaldar*. Just tell us, will you let your second wife in today? Or will you let go of the chance to wash away your sins by keeping a Satyagrahi near you?"

The air tensed up with anticipation. For reasons only her soul knew, Binodini secretly prayed for Shonkar to refuse to let her in, but she knew she was asking for too much. Shonkar would never put his reputation in jeopardy, and so he said, "Of course! Of course I will let her in, Kaka!" But it broke Binodini's heart.

18
CHAPTER

THE NEWS-BEARERS

For as long as Bhaskor Dada stayed at Shonkar's house, Binodini felt safe. Shonkar left early for his duty every day and came back long after everyone had gone to sleep. It gave Binodini and Bipin enough time to get out of the house, offer their services wherever and whenever required and come back home without facing any interrogation. The Vidyut Bahini had by then come to be recognised as the national army by the Jatiya Sarkar, raising problems for the British Raj. Then news of police brutality over Swadesis, especially innocent women, still flew in every now and then, but the people were assured that the Jatiya Sarkar would help them access justice. Even during the famine, Jatiya Sarkar was active in distributing aid. Binodini and Bipin, along with numerous Swadesis, survived on one meal per day while donating everything they could to the relief camps.

For nine months, Binodini abstained from eating anything other than rice and boiled gram, and by the end of that period, she felt herself reborn as a calm and peaceful soul. Even after Bhaskor Dada left, taking

Suchitra and Bipin to Calcutta with him, she did not find herself panicking at all. In fact, as soon as they left, she moved her entire belongings to Suchitra's room and avoided seeing Shonkar for days. She did not come in his way, and miraculously, he managed to stay away from hers. This state of truce and tranquilly lasted till the next year, which started off with some depressing news.

In February 1944, Kamla arrived at Shonkar's house bearing a Bangla newspaper for Binodini and with immense sorrow in her eyes, pointed towards an article.

Shrimati Gandhi leaves mortal body
Mahatma ji sheds tears

Binodini suddenly felt her strength leaving her body in an instant. Stumbling over to the nearby wall, she leaned over to steady herself. Gandhi Baba had lost his wife—the woman who followed him wherever he went, paving the path of the country's freedom, and who used to be the very source of his strength. This somehow felt like a personal loss. It kept Binodini awake at night for several days.

On 6th May, however, Kamla came knocking with a newspaper again, but this time, she was jumping with joy. Binodini eagerly took the paper from her grasp and read the headlines Kamla was pointing at:

Mahatma ji released from house arrest;
Nation rejoices

Binodini's eyes welled up with tears of joy. She leaned over to the wall again, but the sigh that came out of her mouth indicated her relief. Gandhi Baba was free again, and something told her that the country would be too, very soon.

She closed her eyes that night, and after several nights, sleep finally graced her with its presence.

As the month of July came to an end, Kamla came bearing news, yet again. A troubled expression dominated her face as she pointed to the article that worried her.

"Gandhi Baba has ordered to cease the revolutionary activities? Why?"

"Because the Quit India movement has ended," Kamla responded.

"What does this mean for Tamluk? For the Jatiya Sarkar and Vidyut Bahini?" Binodini inquired.

Kamla had no response. The answer, however, came barging inside the house on the evening of 8th August. Binodini hadn't been feeling well on that day and decided to stay in. She had been contemplating if she should go out for an evening walk to feel a little better, when Shonkar crashed into the house. When she heard the noise, she immediately stood up to inquire about the noise, but Shonkar was already inside her room. A sinister smile played on his lips, and a year ago, it would have scared her to death, but now, she stayed calm.

"Why are you so happy?" she asked in an even voice.

"Because it is a happy day, but alas, not for you!" he said, and his voice was shaking with laughter.

"What did you mean?"

"I mean, my beloved wife, that your Sarbadhinayak Barada Kanta Kuiti has ordered the dissolution of your Sarkar! It is a wonderful day!"

Binodini swallowed as her husband laughed evilly. She hadn't heard about the order, but she could not say that she hadn't expected it. She was mildly surprised, to be sure, but she couldn't give Shonkar the satisfaction.

"So what?" she brashly asked, savouring the satisfaction of seeing his evil grin fade from his smug face.

"What was that now?"

"So what? Gandhi Baba has given explicit orders to end it, and we believe in him. It does not mean that we are ending our struggle with the British rule," she answered, not just to snatch away his feeling of triumph, but also because she believed what she said.

"No, no, no, no, Binodini," Shonkar's smile had returned, enhancing the wrinkles on his face. He slowly walked towards her, making her uneasy, "You are too naive. You do not understand what does this means for you and your leaders! The British will have the complete control over this district again and I will have my control over..."

"Stop advancing towards me," Binodini yelled at him when he came too close. She took a deep breath to regain the state of calm that she had achieved through severe hard work and sacrifice, but Shonkar suddenly held her arms in a tight grip.

"You have run away enough from me. You have exercised your will far too long. You have tested my patience beyond its limits." He pushed her away and said, "I am going back to the *thana*, but when I return, I wish to see my house as I had left it a year ago! I want everything and everyone back in its place! And

I have not abandoned my hopes of getting a son! Do not disappoint me this time." He stormed out of the house, and left Binodini back to where she had begun.

Over the next couple of months, Binodini contemplated running away from the house several times. The Sarbadhinayak had been arrested and, as August came to an end, all activities of the Jatiya Sarkar also ceased. Kamla kept coming to her with bad news, and Shonkar resumed torturing her by curtailing her freedom. Earlier, he used to hit her every time she lost a child. Now, he hit her for not conceiving a child.

"You are fifteen, for God's sake," he would yell, "what is wrong with you?"

She always refrained from replying, but she suspected that her body had become incapable of bearing a child after multiple miscarriages. A big part of hers was happy. She did not wish to bear Shonkar's child, but a tiny part of her craved for motherhood as well. She consoled herself by thinking that the non-existent child would not have to suffer for having a man like Shonkar as a father. And if the baby turned out to be a girl, the poor child would live in a nightmare all her life. Shonkar would make the house a living hell for her.

Binodini shook her head vigorously at the thought. 'No', she was better off without a child, even if it meant getting beaten by her husband for her whole life. So she made peace with the situation. However, the peace of Britain was shattered with the end of the Second World War. Kamla was not the only news-bearer Binodini

relied upon during her confinement. For Bipin who was completing his studies in Calcutta at his Dada's behest, kept on sending her letters filled with personal anecdotes and important political updates. In September 1945, she received one such long-awaited letter.

Dearest Bini,

Your responses to my letters come too late and are too short. I can only imagine your state of mind at Shonkar's house. I wish I could finish my studies and start working soon. It would make things so much easier for you and for all of us! I can imagine that my letters are mostly a bunch of words stitched together in a meaningless fashion, just random thoughts that I struggle to share with anyone but you... but when I receive your responses, even if they are just a couple of sentences assuring me of your well-being, even if just to put me at ease, I sigh with relief at the thought that you are still there waiting for me safe and sound. But I must resist rambling in this message, for I wish to deliver news you must find exciting.

You must have already read it, but the World War has officially come to an end. Britain, along with its allies, has won the war, but have war and violence ever did anyone good? Britain has been left bankrupt. It owes a large debt not only to several of its colonies but also to the thousands of Indian soldiers who made a large portion of its army.

Bini, the air here in Calcutta has started to stir up in anticipation of breathing freely at last. The Raj owes us independence, and I am assuming that the air in Tamluk smells similar to you, for India is gearing up towards freedom. I hope to see the first sunrise of a free nation

with you, Bini, for I never say it enough, but you are my priyo bondhu, and I can only wish that you consider me the same.

Yours,
Bipin

Binodini had a wide grin on her face as she read Bipin's letter over and over again. Even the lines he had struck off after having second thoughts about them made her smile. She had to strain hard to make out the struck off words, but she knew what they meant and how Bipin must have felt while writing them.

Priyo Bondhu, that is what they were. Binodini now knew why thoughts about the possibility of their being married often confused her. For although life would have been much better with Bipin, and much easier, she dared say, this sudden dawn of clarity made her realise that she did not want Bipin, or anyone else, for that matter, to be her husband. Bipin was her friend, and even though many people found the prospect of their friendship suspicious, but that is what they were.

Her mother, her friends, her relatives, society– everyone had been telling her that her sole purpose was to serve her husband throughout her life. They had been telling her that no other man was supposed to have any place in her life. So when Bipin had become a close friend, she had told herself that it was only because he was her Nonod's Debor; and when the thought of marriage with him had struck her, she had been left confused, guilty, and wondering, but the pall had been lifted at last.

She grabbed the ink pot from Shonkar's study and started writing:

Priyo Bondhu Bipin,

I can feel the air stirring here in Tamluk as well, and I share your wish to see the first sunrise of a free India with you. I am also aware that you are worried about me and my living conditions, but you are trapped by a misplaced sense of responsibility towards me. Do not get me wrong, for I am flattered that you wish to earn and make things better for me, but Bipin, each person needs to fight their battles on their own. For as long as I can remember, I have been taught to depend on a man for my financial needs, and freeing me from Shonkar by making me dependent on you would not assure me of my freedom.

Yet, I owe it to you for making me realise this truth. From this day forward, until the day our motherland attains her much deserved freedom, I shall endeavour to become worthy of attaining my independence as well. The only thing I need from you is encouragement. So until next time...

Yours Priyo Bondhu,

Binodini

19
CHAPTER

FREEDOM

For the next two years, as the Congress leaders worked up a negotiation with the British to pave the way for India's independence, Binodini drowned herself in textbooks which Kamla smuggled in for her. She would leave the house as soon as Shonkar left and travel to Alinan every day. After paying homage to the abandoned hut of Gandhi Buri, she would then head off to Sulata's house and spend her time studying with her. She was confident that education was going to help her attain her freedom. But it was difficult with what was going on in the country.

Bipin's letters too became more and more tense as the negotiations under Cabinet Mission commenced. Even a child who was supposed to spend his/her growing years in innocence realised that independence would come at a high price – partition. The country was fearing the prospect of being separated on communal lines. The Congress and the Muslim League were at odds with each other, and with growing tension among the

leaders, the common people were soon at loggerheads with each other.

Every time Binodini picked up a newspaper, she was left frowning over reports of community clashes, but her eyes always searched for a headline bearing Gandhi Baba's name. Gandhi Baba – whose principles of non-violence had led the country for years towards freedom. Gandhi Baba — whose ideals had inspired Matangini Hazra to take up the thorny path of Satyagraha and earn herself the title of 'Gandhi Buri'. Gandhi Baba—who at 77, had now been almost entirely isolated by political leaders in the quest to form their own independent government. Gandhi Baba—whose will to keep his principles alive prompted him to stay amongst hostile and ignorant country people, hoping that they would have a change of heart and would demand for a united and free India, instead of a partitioned one. Newspapers were flooded with information about his peace mission, but they also reported on its apparent failure.

Bipin's letters had also become less anecdotal and more informative.

"Calcutta is burning," he would write, and Binodini would lose the will to read it any further, until one day, his letters stopped coming.

She kept writing to him, hoping that he would respond someday, but in vain. Anxiety took over her and Sulata as they pondered over the possibilities.

"The conditions are not stable in Calcutta," they would reason with each other, "he might not have been be able to respond."

For weeks, they tried to infuse hope into each other, but the inkling of something untoward happening slowly

made its home within their souls. One evening, when Binodini returned to Shonkar's house at her usual time, she found a woman clad in a white saree sitting outside the locked door. She was seated on the front porch, head bowed down and face hidden in her lap, and she was shaking. A strange foreboding filled Binodini with fear as she climbed down off the cart and slowly approached the woman.

With a racing heart and an unsteady hand, she prodded the woman's shoulder, "Didi, who are you...." The woman raised her head and shocked Binodini into silence. Her head started swimming with unwanted imaginary visuals and she fell down on her knees in front of the woman.

The woman...the widow...she could not believe, she did not want to believe....

"No...." The half-hearted effort of pronouncing the word escaped her mouth, "No...No...Nonod ji...." She finally cried, as Suchitra's vacant eyes bore into hers.

For the first time in his life Shonkar saw his wife and sister being civil, even good to each other. They were equally shattered, and the tragedy brought them together in their grief. He was aware that his sister needed his wife more than his wife needed his sister, but his wife did not seem to mind. She was too distracted and heartbroken to realise that Suchitra was leeching on to her for emotional support, because she suspected that Shonkar would not want to support her anymore.

Shonkar could not deny it. For as long as Bhaskor had been alive, he had kept sending his wife money and gifts from wherever he was for his job, even when she lived with Shonkar. A room—that was all Shonkar had to give her, and in return, she used to keep Binodini under her thumb for him.

But now, she would be his burden. His salary was not compatible with this new arrangement that was being imposed upon him, and he did not even know for how long his job would remain his. India was changing, and he feared that apart from people turning against one another on communal grounds, they would turn against the likes of him as well. His neighbours already hated him for his engagement with the Raj, and with the current tension, he was always on the lookout for a possible attack.

Under such circumstances, it pricked him to have to look out for an additional person, but Binodini was supporting Suchitra, and so he had to as well. He glared at his wife, now a fully blossomed woman of 17—who had her arms around her Nonod's shoulder. She was the only reason his neighbours had not lynched him to death yet. Hence, he could do nothing but be a silent spectator and watch the drama unfold.

"My Pati Babu did not even want to do anything with the violence," Suchitra was narrating for the umpteenth time, "Devi Maa knows how he and his *Priyo Bondhu* Kabir stood by each other through thick and thin. I adored his wife Haseena as well. But the crowd.... They did not accept it.... We were over at Kabir's house when they barged in, and killed them both in cold blood! We could do nothing to save them."

Shonkar saw Binodini shift in even closer to Suchitra as the latter continued speaking, "and my Chhotu Dada, what was his fault? He had only rushed in to his Dada's aid, but those heartless souls, did not spare him at all. They did not see how young he was? Is 19, an age to...to...d..." and she burst into inconsolable tears.

Binodini's eyes were flooded as well, but Suchitra was not done yet, "Only Devi Maa knows, how Haseena and I got out of there and saved ourselves! Horrible, horrible times...."

The two women hugged each other and sobbed for a long time. Shonkar could not take it anymore. He got up and made his way out of the house to get some fresh air. The evening air was crowded with flocks of birds returning to their nests, and temple bells rang from some distance away. He decided to take a walk to the temple and back for a while, but when only a few steps later he felt a passerby's eyes following him, he realised it was a bad decision. The villagers were staring at him and talking about him, making no effort to be discreet.

"There goes the traitor...."

"Look, he has no shame after helping the British destroy this country."

"He still walks with his head held high, as if he has no remorse..."

"*Kormo* will catch up one day, *Bondhu*! It will catch up soon!"

"He will have to suffer once his masters leave...."

Shonkar could not bear anymore. Even before he had reached the temple, he retraced his steps back to

his house, and made his decision. He would have to leave this place. And he would have to leave soon.

Binodini sneaked into Suchitra's room when she knew she would not be there. Going around the bed towards the closed window, she bent over to pull out a tile that had a tiny crack on one of its corners. The tile came out, revealing a secret hiding compartment beneath the floor. Carefully, she got out a bunch of letters tied together with a cloth ribbon. Replacing the tile in its place, she tucked the bundle inside the folds of her saree and left the room towards the kitchen. She pulled the letters out and caressed the top most one with a shaking hand.

'Have I lost everything?' She wondered. Her childhood, her family, Gandhi Buri, Bipin... everything and everyone she held dear to her had been taken away from her. And now, Shonkar insisted that she lose her nation, her motherland as well! He did not ask, he did not discuss, he did not seek advice. He simply stated that they were leaving for East Pakistan tomorrow.

The next day, 15th August, 1947, India was finally getting her hard earned freedom, albeit at the cost of partition; Punjab was being partitioned to form West Pakistan, and Bengal...to form East Pakistan. At first, she did not understand why they had to leave, but when Shonkar ordered that she was not to tell any neighbours, not even Kamla about his decision, she understood.

Shonkar was scared of the wrath he was expecting to face from the neighbours once the British officially leave India. Still, she asked, "But why?"

"I have some distant relatives there, who do not wish to leave, so...."

"I do not wish to leave either, Shonkar," she cut him off.

"Binodini!" Shonkar yelled, "How many times do I have to make you understand? You should not disrespect your husband."

"I know I am a terrible wife, Shonkar, which is why I fail to understand! Why do you insist on taking me with you?"

Shonkar fell silent and refused to respond, but Binodini knew. She was merely a shield for her husband to escape the village and then the country safely. Whether he would care to keep her with him once they reach Pakistan, she could not say. She contemplated sneaking out of the house that night and moving to Alinan for good, but fate laughed at her when doctor told her that she was pregnant. Of all the days, fate had chosen this one to dash all her hopes for freedom.

Now she stood in the kitchen, quietly caressing Bipin's letters, dusting them off gently. It had been almost a year since he had.... Her eyes welled up. She plucked out her most favourite of his messages from the pile and read it over and over again. The letter was two years old, and it was the first time Bipin had acknowledged her as his best friend, his *Priyo Bondhu*, and had expressed his wish to see the first sunrise of a free nation with her. She wondered how she was to fulfil his last wish now? How was she to fulfil her purpose in life, which she had finally accepted—to be brave enough to attain her personal freedom from her husband.

'Perhaps, not everyone is destined to fulfil their purpose in life', she thought. When she heard Suchitra's footsteps approaching the kitchen, she quickly hid the letters inside the folds of her saree and turned to acknowledge her sister-in-law.

"Nonod ji?" She looked at Suchitra's face searchingly under the faint Crescent moonlight and the dim oil lamps. There had been a time when she had detested Suchitra, but now, even though she was aware that she was nice to her only for her own selfish gains, her grief had humanised her in Binodini's eyes.

"Have you packed?" Suchitra inquired.

"Yes, where were you? I went to look for you in your room," Binodini asked, knowing well that Suchitra had been in the bath at that time.

"I was in the bath. It helps me to relax. Let us go."

"Where?"

"To your friend Kamla's. Shonkar will be able to come home only in the morning. Night duty...."

"Yes, but...."

"To listen to the radio...your Gandhi Buri's dream is finally coming true, is it not?"

Binodini was surprised. This was the last thing she had expected to come out of Suchitra's mouth, ever. But if she had actually changed for the better, Binodini could not complain. The sister-in-laws stepped out into the brightly lit streets with Tiranga waving outside houses with pride. They knew that not very far away from their small village, Bengal, and further away to the west, Punjab, was burning. People were being killed, women were being raped, and blood was being shed. Freedom was bringing a bitter-sweet taste with it, and yet, there

was hope, that things would change for the better. If the people of this Holy Land had to choose between staying happily apart and living miserably together, perhaps, staying apart was a better option after all.

With tears filled in her eyes and Bipin's letters close to her for comfort, Binodini made her way inside the heavily packed front yard of Kamla and her husband's house. Some people did have their own radios at home, but Kamla's husband had invited everyone for over tea and sweets to celebrate the special occasion.

Both sister-in-law's made themselves comfortable. The house had been decorated like a bride, *diyas* and lanterns lit the entire front yard; and sweets were being passed on.

Most people, however, refused to eat until they had heard Nehru on the radio. Binodini had been fasting as well, and thus refused to eat. Soon, as midnight approached, Kamla's husband tuned the radio and everyone fell silent.

Nehru's voice reverberated in the night, and with a racing heart, Binodini listened....

"Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny," Nehru began, "and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom."

The crowd cheered as Nehru went on, and Binodini strained to listen. She was afraid that if she missed his speech, the moment of independence would never come. Gandhi Buri's dream would never come to fruition if she missed out on even a word. So, silencing the crowd with a hush, she listened to India's first Prime

Minister pledging to dedicate his life to the service of nation. As he talked about the pain of labour, India had endured to reach this day Binodini thought, 'Gandhi Buri's sacrifice was not going to be in vain. Her life, and those of several others who had braved the bullets of the Raj, had been sacrificed for this very day.' Binodini was close to tears.

When Nehru mentioned Mahatma Gandhi, the crowd cheered again, "On this day our first thoughts go to the architect of this freedom, the father of our nation.... We have often been unworthy followers of his and have strayed from his message, but not only we but succeeding generations will remember this message and bear the imprint in their hearts of this great son of India...."

When the Prime Minister concluded his speech with a heartfelt message to this Holy Land she was about to leave for good, she smiled, "And to India, our much-loved motherland, the ancient, the eternal and the ever-new, we pay our reverent homage and we bind ourselves afresh to her service. Jai Hind."

Kamla's front yard reverberated with the heartfelt echo of the chant, 'Jai Hind' and as the clock struck 12, there was a tearful celebration, so lively and profound, that Binodini could not help but break down into tears. For a minute, she silently took in the dancing, and looked at the happy faces of the people she adored—Kamla, Tarapad Kaka, the many villagers who had taken a stand for her, when she had failed to do it for herself—and then, not finding enough courage to say goodbye, she slipped out of the house, and went back to Shonkar's for the last time.

Climbing on to the terrace, she settled down with her face towards the east while keeping Bipin's letters close to her heart. This was not how she had imagined to welcome the country's independence at all, and yet, without a blink, she waited for the sunrise. At the break of dawn, she finally breathed in the free air of a new day with her unborn child rejoicing in her womb—India had broken away from the shackles of slavery at last.

EPILOGUE

On the evening of the 15th August, Shonkar led Binodini and Suchitra to catch the last cart of the day to leave for East Pakistan. Binodini reluctantly left her husband's village, acting as his shield. She wondered if she would be selfish to not to do so. Shonkar was the father of her unborn child, after all, and even though she hadn't told him about the pregnancy yet, she somehow felt duty-bound to protect him.

But the spot from where the cart was leaving for the border was filled with chaos. Taking in the state of the crowd, Shonkar told Binodini and Suchitra to wait for him while he talked to the cart driver.

As they stayed put, Suchitra leaned down to whisper conspiratorially in Binodini's ears, "You should stay, Shonkar would never be a good father." Binodini was startled. "I know. I had followed you to Doctor Babu's... do not ask why, I am already too embarrassed," she quickly added and continued, "If it turns out to be a girl, Shonkar would make both of your lives a hell, and if it turns out to be a boy, he would raise him to

be his shadow, which none of us want, now, do we?" Suchitra's eyes were twinkling with amusement, and Binodini could only stare at her in awe.

"Do not look at me like that! We both know you will be a better parent to your child if you raise it alone! I know you must be scared, for what if it doesn't take? But Binodini, I know it will, because you won't have Shonkar and me around you. Your child will survive, I know it in my heart, and you shall do everything to give this baby the life it deserves! Raise it to be free and spirited."

With tears in her grateful eyes, Binodini looked up at her Nonod and realised that she had actually changed. She embraced her wholeheartedly for the first time in 10 years, and when she heard Shonkar's booming voice from the last cart he had managed to buy their seats into, she pulled away. With a last look of respect and love, Suchitra walked away to the cart.

Binodini watched her go and sit in the partially visible cart and waited for it to start leaving, and then, she ran—not away from it, but towards it....

She couldn't let him go without informing him of her decision. Throughout their married life, she had played hide and seek with him—sneaking out, sneaking in, running away and hiding from him. But this time, she would not run away like a coward. She wanted him to know that she was choosing to stay behind by her own free will. So when she caught up with the cart and was finally within Shonkar's earshot, she shouted at him, "I am not coming, Shonkar. I am leaving you, forever!"

Shonkar's outstretched hand sagged down as his jaw fell open in a stunned expression. His sister was crammed

inside the cart behind him, out of her view. Binodini wished she could catch one last glance of Suchitra, but she had run out of breath now.

"Binodini, you will regret this...," Shonkar finally managed to reply and Binodini finally halted in her tracks.

Breathing heavily from fatigue, she shook her head at her husband who was growing smaller with each passing second, "No Shonkar," she yelled, as she placed one hand over her belly in a meaningful gesture, "I won't."

As the crowd chasing after the cart whizzed past her, Binodini captured the last sight of Shonkar's utterly confused face before he lost her forever. She did not know if he had understood what she had meant, but she did know that she was going to be a mother soon, and she had a feeling that she was going to give birth to a daughter who she could not name anything other than Matangini.

Hoping to find a cart which could take her to Geonkhali, she retraced her back to where it had all started. Her Damodar had been overpowered by her Hooghly and Rupnarayan; and she was finally at peace with herself.

PART IVA

Article 51A

Fundamental duties

It shall be the duty of every citizen of India -

(a) to abide by the Constitution and respect its ideals and institutions, the National Flag and the National Anthem;

(b) to cherish and follow the noble ideals which inspired our national struggle for freedom;

(c) to uphold and protect the sovereignty, unity and integrity of India;

(d) to defend the country and render national service when called upon to do so;

(e) to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India transcending religious, linguistic and regional or sectional diversities; to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women;

(f) to value and preserve the rich heritage of our composite culture;

(g) to protect and improve the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers and wild life, and to have compassion for living creatures;

(h) to develop the scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform;

(i) to safeguard public property and to abjure violence;

(j) to strive towards excellence in all spheres of individual and collective activity so that the nation constantly rises to higher levels of endeavour and achievement;

(k) who is a parent or guardian to provide opportunities for education to his child or, as the case may be, ward between the age of six and fourteen years.

Prapti Sharma (b. 2000)

She is a young law graduate, writer and poet. She is passionate about history, mythology and philosophy, and seeks to give words to stories that matter but still remain untold. Prior to being selected as a YUVA author, she wrote her first children's adventure novel at the age of thirteen. She has also written a short story and some of her poems have also been published in various anthologies.

Prime Minister's Scheme for Mentoring Young Authors
YUVA (Young, Upcoming and Versatile Authors)

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